

Therian Prey

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Therian Prey*Cyndi Friberg*

Therian Heat, Book Two: Before Carissa has time to react to her sister's disappearance, she's kidnapped and taken deep into the Colorado mountains. Her kidnapper swears he's protecting her, but Carissa doesn't know what to believe. He emanates danger, strength and raw sexuality. She's drawn to him, craves his demanding kiss and the slide of his hard body against and into hers.

Quinn has always been an outsider, scorned and mistrusted by other Therian shapeshifters. Now he's in the middle of a budding civil war and he's not sure how to disentangle himself without endangering Carissa. Though her powers are latent, Carissa has the potential of becoming the most powerful Therian the world has ever seen.

It was Quinn's intention to bring Carissa to safety and simply walk away, but one taste of her sweet lips and he knows he'll never let her go. She won't be truly safe until she has selected her mate—and he intends to be the one she chooses.

Note from Cyndi: Many plot elements in *Therian Heat* continue on from book to book. Each couple has secured their happy ending by the end of the book, but the series is more fun if you read the books in order. Also, this book was published a few years back under the same title and author name.



Chapter One



“Is it as bad as you thought?” Carissa stood in the doorway of her sister’s office, waiting for Ava to look up from the computer screen.

Ava sighed and minimized the spreadsheet she’d been agonizing over all morning. “Define ‘bad’. It’s not as dismal as last summer, but sales are still sluggish.”

“We just have to ride it out until winter. Ski season will turn things around. You’ll see.” Hoping to lighten her sister’s mood, Carissa smiled.

The bell above the front door jingled and Carissa glanced over her shoulder. The shop was small by metropolitan standards, but space came at a premium in Breckenridge, Colorado. Ava oversaw inventory, maintenance and accounting, which left managing their employees and dealing with customers to Carissa.

“Be right back,” Carissa said, but Ava had already returned to her accounting woes.

Carissa wended her way through racks of hoodies and t-shirts. A tall, dark-haired man stood near the display of marked-down snowboards. With broad shoulders, lean hips and muscular arms, his interest in vigorous activities was obvious.

“Can I help you?” Anticipation coiled around her as she waited for him to turn around. Was she really so desperate for male companionship that she was ready to hit on a potential customer? How pathetic.

He turned and smiled. Then his dark eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared. His head tilted and he leaned toward her as he inhaled slowly. Time paused, suspending them in the moment as their gazes locked.

“I was told you rent ATVs.”

The simple statement snapped her back into customer service mode and she dragged her gaze away from his hypnotic stare. She had to pull herself together. He wasn't classically handsome. His nose was too bold and his cheekbones broad rather than jutting. A short beard complemented his rugged features and drew her attention to his mouth. His top lip arched gracefully while the bottom looked soft and full, perfect...for nibbling? Had that thought really crossed *her* mind?

She gave herself a firm mental shake. This was ridiculous. “We’re partners with Pine Valley Ranch. They have three hundred acres of trails and mixed motor tracks.” Needing a distraction from her disturbing customer, she walked to the wall display and grabbed a brochure. When she turned around, he stood right in front of her. His warm, woodsy scent filled her nose and she fought back the urge to wiggle. She felt restless and... She couldn't even define the sensations ricocheting through her body.

He took the brochure and glanced through the colorful pages then tucked it into the back pocket of his jeans. The motion stretched his t-shirt across his torso, outlining each ridge and curve. Holy hell, the man was cut. Her fingertips tingled, eager to explore every delectable inch.

“Can I bring my own bike, or are the trails reserved for their rentals?”

Swallowing past the sudden lump in her throat, she said, “The trails are open to the public. There are a few restrictions, but they’re listed in the brochure.” He stood too close. Was he doing it intentionally? She should back away or push past him. Yet she wanted to rub against him and strip off that cruel t-shirt. “Is this your first visit to Colorado?”

His lips parted, displaying even, white teeth. “Far from it. There’s something about the Rockies that gets in your blood, makes you crave it.”

She stared into his dark eyes and felt the strange yearning again. It was like hunger on steroids with a side-order of Spanish fly. Her mind scrambled for a polite response while her body ached for something she didn't fully understand.

"So, Carissa, would you like to grab something to eat?" The intensity in his eyes mocked his casual tone.

"How did you...know my name?" She felt muddled, almost drugged.

A slow, sexy smile parted his lips as he raised his hand. He traced the lower edge of her name tag with his fingertip and his knuckle grazed the upper swell of her breast. Heat spread through her chest and her pulse echoed in her ears. "If you want to play hard to get, you'd better lose this."

She slapped his hand aside. "I wasn't playing hard to get." Her nipples tightened, her breasts feeling heavy and sensitive. What the hell was wrong with her? He wasn't *that* good-looking. And she wasn't this desperate. "I can't leave the store, even if I wanted to. We're still open for several hours." She forced the excuse past her dry lips and stubbornly ignored the demands of her body.

"I can wait." He grinned.

Her mother had taught her to be cautious, to never accept anyone at face value. She needed to push him away and see if he was interested enough to try again. "Sorry. I have plans tonight."

His gaze focused on her lips as if he wanted to lick them for her. "Too bad." He hesitated a moment longer then strolled toward the door. At the last minute, he looked over his shoulder and said, "See you around."

Carissa pressed her hand over her pounding heart as he strode down the sidewalk and across the street. It had been ages since anyone flirted with her. Tourists tried to pick her up from time to time, but this man hadn't seemed like a tourist. More like a trophy hunter.

That wasn't fair. He hadn't misbehaved nearly as much as her body had "mis-reacted" to his subtle signals.

"Who was that?" Ava asked from the doorway to her office.

Heat blossomed on Carissa's cheeks as his image lingered in her mind. "I have no idea, but I'd sure as hell like to find out."

"Did he buy anything?"

Carissa looked at her sister and laughed. "I'm pretty sure what he wants isn't for sale, at least not in this store."



QUINTON JENARO DUG his phone out of his pocket then climbed into his truck. He could see the front of Summit County Outfitters from his position on an adjacent street, but Carissa couldn't see him unless she stepped out onto the sidewalk. He wasn't sure what he'd expected—hadn't even been sure the owners of the shop were the sisters he was looking for—but there was no doubt left in his mind. He'd located Kyle's long-lost females.

Carissa's scent lingered in his nose, teasing him, calling him, hardening his body, making him ache. It had taken all the discipline he possessed not to touch her. Hell, he'd wanted to kiss her senseless then bend her over the nearest display table and stay inside her until they were both drenched in sweat and trembling from exhaustion. He wanted Carissa with the obsessive intensity only caused by Therian heat.

And any Therian male who caught her scent would react the same way.

This was a serious complication.

With his gaze fixed on the storefront, he called Kyle Lashton.

"Hey, Quinn." Muffling the phone, Kyle said something to someone in the background then returned to ask, "Any luck?"

"Is this a bad time?"

"Mom's just harassing me. Nothing unusual in that."

“I found them.” Quinn smiled, picturing the fight melting out of his friend. “But we have a problem.” There was no way to sugarcoat it, so he just spit it out. “Carissa is going into heat.”

“You didn’t—”

“No! How can you even ask me that?” Resentment and frustration made his tone sharp. If his best friend immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion, how could he hope to convince the council he had nothing to do with Carissa’s condition? “It’s just started. I didn’t notice her scent until I entered the shop, but her pheromones are powerful.”

“Damn it.” Kyle muttered something under his breath then went on. “If you defile her, even without meaning to, the council will blame this on you.”

“Yeah, I figured that out all by myself.” Quinn leaned his head against the headrest and sighed. “There’s no help for it. The alternative is even worse.”

“Can you grab her without causing a scene?”

“Not unless I take Ava too, and two hysterical females would be harder than hell to control. I have a feeling I’ll have my hands full with Carissa.”

“We can’t let anyone else pick up her scent.”

“I get that. I’ll stay close. If her scent increases, I’ll move in. If it remains faint, I’ll stick to the original plan.”

After a short pause, Kyle asked, “Did you see Ava?”

“Carissa was talking to someone when I entered the shop. I couldn’t see who it was, but it was likely her sister.” He settled back in the seat, resigned to the monotony of a stakeout. “When can I expect you?”

“Later tonight. I’ll call once I’m on the road.”



CARISSA LOCKED THE front door to Summit County Outfitters and headed up Main Street. Ava had left a couple of hours earlier,

promising to have dinner waiting when Carissa arrived. Their Victorian was within walking distance of the shop, and parking was challenging in downtown Breckenridge, so the sisters seldom bothered with a car.

Tucking her hands into the pockets of her jacket, Carissa hurried along the sidewalk. The night was clear and cool. Those not used to brisk spring nights were often caught by surprise when the sun sank behind the mountains. Carissa understood Colorado's rhythm, chilly mornings, sun-drenched days and crisp starlit nights.

Their mother bought the Victorian when they arrived in Breckenridge eleven years before. Living quarters were upstairs while the main floor had been used as a storefront. By the time Carissa and Ava took over the business, the quaint rental shop had grown into an outdoor sports emporium housed in a separate building.

A sudden chill raced down Carissa's spine and her steps faltered. She glanced around, trying to identify the source of her discomfort. Several clusters of people congregated outside bars, chatting and laughing before heading back inside. No one was paying any attention to her.

She turned down a side street, putting some distance between her and the nightlife, but the sensation didn't abate. Tucking her purse directly under her arm, she jogged toward the circle of light cast by stylized streetlamps. Her heart fluttered and her mouth went dry.

Pausing beneath the streetlight, she took another look around. B&Bs were peppered through the shops now, but the street was deserted. Nothing out of the ordinary. No sinister characters lurking in the shadows.

"Get a grip," she muttered as she dug her phone out of her pocket and her keys out of her purse. Her house was two blocks over and another two up the hill.

She continued along the sidewalk with renewed purpose, her stride just short of a jog. Despite all the evidence of her paranoia, her pulse hammered out warnings until she reached her front door. She returned

her phone to her pocket and slipped her key into the lock, pushing the door inward with her shoulder.

“Ava?” The interior of the house was dark. Had Ava already gone to bed? She kicked the door closed behind her and turned toward the stairs.

A large palm muffled her scream as a man pressed against her back. His arm banded her waist, trapping her arms against her sides. She wiggled and twisted, her cries barely audible.

“Settle down and we’ll take you to see your sister.” Her captor’s tone was harsh and low despite his reassuring words.

As her eyes adjusted to the dark, a fresh wave of panic crashed over her. Furniture was toppled and a lamp was smashed near the archway leading to the kitchen. “Where the fuck is Ava?” Her words were garbled by the man’s large hand.

“Put her in the car. We’re out of here.” The impatient order drew her attention to her left where a second man stood in shadow.

“Nate said not to hurt her,” the first man muttered, his arm creeping closer to her breasts, “but I think she’s in heat.”

“Don’t even think about it! Get her in the car and—”

Not interested in their debate, she threw her weight forward then jammed her elbow into her captor’s ribs. He rewarded her with a startled grunt as his hold slipped. Frantically reaching for her, he came up with a handful of jacket as she smoothly shed the garment and darted out of range.

The second man lunged for her, but his advance was intercepted by a massive newcomer. More impression than substance, the third man flew out of the kitchen and shoved her attacker back, a menacing growl his only attempt at communication. All she could see was his broad back as he eclipsed her attacker.

“Jenaro,” the smaller man muttered. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“Kyle Lashton disagrees.”

Recognition jolted Carissa. She knew that low, rumbling voice. This was the hunk from earlier today, the one who'd asked about ATV rentals. What was he doing here? How had he known she was in trouble?

He was following you. That's how!

The men faced off. Two against one didn't seem fair, though Jenaro was nearly as big as the other two combined. Another low growl made the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. They were literally growling at each other.

Time paused, tension palpable as they sized up their opponents. Then action resumed in a flurry of motion, both surreal and terrifying. The smaller two crouched, eyes suddenly glowing as their bodies melted and flowed. Their human shapes shrank and re-formed, twisting and distorting until snarling wolves stood in twin piles of empty clothing.

Carissa stumbled back, hand pressed over her wildly thudding heart. The air around her crackled, making the hairs on her arms float and sway. The wolves were huge, their dark fur grizzled and thick. With hackles raised and teeth bared, they advanced on their opponent.

At least their attention was focused on Jenaro. But for how long?

Their slanted eyes flashed with yellowish light as they postured and growled. The wolves blocked her path to the front door, and Jenaro stood between her and the kitchen. She glanced around for a weapon, but as long as they remained focused on each other, escape made more sense than aggression.

Moving as one, the wolves charged. Jenaro batted one aside with his forearm, sending the creature slamming against the wall. He kicked the second wolf in the head as it barreled toward him. The wolf yelped then whined, slinking into the shadows with its tail between its legs.

The first wolf returned with more determination, jumping for Jenaro's throat. Jenaro caught the wolf with both hands and slammed it against the floor. The wolf snapped and growled, but as soon as Jenaro released his hold on its thick fur, the creature ran toward the front door.

This couldn't be real. No man was strong enough to wrestle two wolves barehanded.

Jenaro yanked the door open and the wolves darted past him.

"Stay here!" His gaze flashed through the gloom with a gold-green intensity she hadn't noticed before. Shit! If he was one of them, why hadn't he transformed? He rushed out after the wolves, not sparing her a backward glance.

Momentarily paralyzed by confusion and fear, Carissa mentally scrambled for something to do. "Ava?" The wolf had said he would take her to her sister, but she had to be sure Ava wasn't just hiding. When no one responded to her second shout, she ran across the room and snatched her jacket off the floor. She rushed to lock the front door while frantically searching the pockets for her phone.

The door swung inward so abruptly she jumped back to avoid a collision. "There must have been two teams. They..." Jenaro snatched the phone out of her hand. "Don't even think about it. Police will only slow us down." He slammed the door and locked it then turned around. The bizarre glow had left his eyes, but his dark gaze bore into hers. "They'll get reinforcements and return. We can't stay here."

"What did you mean there were two teams? Where is Ava?" She glanced at her phone, knowing she wasn't fast enough to grab it or strong enough to wrest it from his hand. So what else could she do? *Run like hell!* Not until she understood what was happening, and why they'd been targeted.

"They dove into a car and took off. Ava's scent faded as soon as I left the house. I think she was taken out the back by someone else."

Her heart gave a rebellious lurch. "Why wasn't someone protecting her? Why did you follow me?"

"Even I can't be in two places at one time. At the end of her shift, I made sure she was locked inside the house then I headed back to your shop and waited for you to close up. Kyle was supposed to be here by now."

“And while you were following me, they got Ava!” Guilt and fear welled within her, gripping her stomach as she struggled to swallow. “We have to find her! We have to—”

“Get the hell out of here. The wolves will be back.”

Her befuddled brain fought against the implications of what she’d just seen. “Who are you? *What* are you?” Even the question sounded ridiculous.

“Quinton Jenaro. Call me Quinn.” He slowly approached, his dark gaze cautious yet resolute. “Kyle was hoping to defuse the situation before Osric found you, but Osric was closer than we realized.”

Osric? The name slammed into her mind like a baseball bat, spiking her anxiety. If her worthless excuse for a father was involved in this mess, she was in serious trouble. Osric Parlain was more of a threat than...werewolves?

Instinct engaged and she made a mad dash for the door. Quinn caught her around the waist then spun her around and pressed her back against the door.

“We don’t have time for this,” he snapped, his hands remaining on her upper arms. “I’m here to protect you. You don’t need to be afraid.”

She laughed, the sound sharp and nervous. “Protect me from what? Stalkers and thieves?” She banged on the door with her heel.

“This isn’t a joke.”

“I figured that out when people started turning into animals!” She glared while awareness sped her pulse. He was huge, tall and heavily muscled. A hot tingle slid down her spine, igniting heat low in her belly. It had been like this in the store. As soon as she looked into his eyes, lust erupted, making her restless and hot. Despite her mistrust and his frustration, desire arced between them. She did her best to ignore the unwanted distraction and focus on the danger. “Why were you able to toss them around like toys?”

“I’ll explain everything as soon as we put some distance between us and the dogs.”

The way he spat the word “dogs” made her pretty sure he wasn’t one. “Why would Osric kidnap Ava? Every penny we have is tied up in our business.”

“This isn’t about money.” Quinn shifted his hands to the door on either side of her head and leaned in close. With his nose just touching her hair, he inhaled slowly. “When did the burning start?”

He asked the question so softly she thought she’d imagined it. As if of their own volition, her hips pushed forward, lightly rubbing her pelvis against his thigh. “This morning, right after *you* came into the store. What the hell did you do to me?”

“I didn’t do anything to you.” He heaved a frustrated sigh and raised his face. “You’ve never felt this before?”

Confused by his odd behavior, she shook away the sensual pull. “What’s your game? I thought my life was in danger. Do we really have time for *this*?”

“You’re right.” He eased his body away, but his dark gaze lingered on her mouth. “The harder you fight the hunger, the more insistent it’ll become. If this is your first season, there’s no way you can control it.”

“Control what?”

He started to say something then shook his head and pushed off the door. “Let’s get you to safety then I’ll explain.”

“Not a chance. If those things are really coming back, I’ll stay with friends tonight and have the police waiting for them when they return.”

“If you care about your friends, you don’t want them involved in this.”

Quinn was right. She couldn’t intentionally endanger her friends. Still, she knew little more than his name. And the fact that he was incredibly strong. She’d learned at a young age how dangerous it could be to blindly trust the wrong person.

“I appreciate the warning.” Easing her hand down and behind her, she slowly unlocked the door. “I’ll disappear. Go off the grid. I spent

most of my childhood like that. I know how to do it.” But what about Ava? Could she hope to find her sister without Quinn’s help?

He just shook his head. “Kyle told me to expect a fight.”

With no other warning, he dragged her away from the door and pulled her hands behind her back. The cool press of metal sent a jolt of fear through her system an instant before anger burned through the pause. She jerked and twisted, screamed and cursed, determined to prevent her other wrist from being caught. With humiliating ease, he bent her over the back of the couch and secured the handcuffs.

“This will be as unpleasant as you make it. Remember that.” He held her in place with the press of his body while he used a bandanna to gag her.

She continued to cry out, but the gag sufficiently muffled her voice. Yanking against the cuffs only hurt her wrists. This was happening and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

He paused to relock the door and grab her purse then lifted her to his shoulder and headed out through the kitchen. He’d said he wouldn’t hurt her, that he was here to protect her. Yeah, right. Women weren’t kidnapped for their own good. They were kidnapped for the depraved pleasure of men.

Yet he stopped to lock the back door as well. Odd behavior for a deranged killer.

The small yard was edged with mature trees, offering daytime shade and privacy. Why couldn’t she live in one of the condos, with cardkey entrances and security cameras?

His truck was blocking the gravel drive where her car and Ava’s were parked. No one paid attention to what went on back here. He’d planned this exit well. Though his truck was midsized, it had an extra-large cab with four doors. He pulled open the door behind the driver’s seat and lowered her to the ground. His gaze searched hers, the look intense and assessing.

"I'll pull over and let you up once we're out of town, but I can't risk you causing a scene."

Was he just being cautious? He acted as if he knew her or had been warned by someone who understood her contrary nature. He kept mentioning Kyle, but she didn't know anyone named Kyle.

His hands were warm and strong, oddly evocative, as he lifted her into the truck and settled her on her stomach. He pulled off her shoes and stashed them behind the seat. Then he tied her ankles and bent her knees, loosely tethering her feet to the handcuffs. The position wasn't as uncomfortable as she'd feared, but it was extremely effective. Not to mention humiliating.

He slipped in behind the wheel and the engine roared to life. Carissa turned her head and angled her face so she could see Quinn's profile. With his shaggy dark hair and rugged features, he looked right at home in this mountain setting.

"Hey, Kyle, it's me." Kyle again. Who the hell was Kyle. Quinn had a cell phone pressed to his ear with one hand while he maneuvered the truck with the other. "You were right. Osric is working with wolves. Blue River pack would be my guess. They know the area."

He paused while Kyle responded, but she could only hear the muffled rhythm of Kyle's voice.

"No. Osric's scent was still strong in the house. I couldn't have missed them by much."

Osric's scent? He'd mentioned Ava's scent too. Humans didn't identify each other by scent. Or toss wolves around like stuffed animals. She ground her teeth into the bandanna and closed her eyes. Apparently the werewolf craze in Hollywood had spread to Colorado.

"She didn't give me too much trouble, but she's mad as hell right now." She opened her eyes as he adjusted the rearview mirror so he could see her. He had the audacity to smile. "I'll check in when I reach the cabin. Talk to you then." He returned the phone to his pocket then asked, "You doing okay back there?"

She glared at him. She was gagged. How was she supposed to respond?

He glanced over his shoulder and chuckled. "I guess I shouldn't have gagged you if I was going to ask questions. Give me ten more minutes and I'll find somewhere to pull over."

The truck bumped and swayed, her body rubbing against the cool leather seats. A slow, flowing heat spread from her shoulders to her knees. Her nipples prickled and tightened, her breasts feeling full and sensitive. Had he put something on the bandanna? What was triggering these sensations?

No, she couldn't blame it on him, at least not directly. She'd been horny as hell ever since he walked into her store.

A low growl rumbled deep in his throat. He fidgeted, raking his hair with his fingers then adjusting his position in the seat. "What got you going again?" His voice was so soft she barely made out the words. "Are you excited by danger, or do you like being tied up?"

Humiliated by the taunt, she arched and wiggled, releasing her frustration in an exasperated cry.

The more she struggled, the more intense the heat became. Her body clenched, focusing the urgency between her thighs. She wasn't a virgin. She knew where these impulses led, but she had never experienced anything faintly similar to this demanding desire. Why now? Was he right? Did danger excite her?

She tried to lie still, to breathe through the bizarre craving. Her pulse seemed amplified, pounding in her ears and between her legs. She groaned and turned her face into the seatback, embarrassed and confused by her own body.

The tension mounted, compressing with painful intensity. Each time the truck bounced or swayed, her hips rocked and her pelvis rubbed against the firm leather seat. Her nails dug into her palms as waves of tingling need washed over her.

This wasn't some unexplained itch that disappeared as quickly as it formed. Something was seriously wrong. Panic joined the emotions already assailing her composure. She turned her head back around and tried to capture Quinn's gaze in the rearview mirror.

The truck dipped violently and her head bumped against the seat belt housing. Pain curled through her craving, amplifying the heat. Had they left the pavement?

Her skin felt stretched, stinging, and her blood seemed to boil. Was she feverish? This had come on so suddenly.

Cool air wafted across her damp skin and the cab light blinked on. She heard the impatient scrape of metal against metal as he maneuvered the seats forward. What the hell was he doing? She needed help not more room! The door slammed and darkness descended again. Then the door beside her knees opened. Yes! Now he'd untie her and set her free. But free to do what? She could barely think beyond the roaring in her ears.

He unfastened the rope and tossed it into the bed of the truck before sliding her across the seat. Guiding her feet to the ground, he helped her stand then firmly closed the door. She leaned against the side of the truck as he dug the key out of his pocket and released the handcuffs. Then she yanked the gag off and rubbed her wrists, conflict raging inside her.

Trembling with uncertainty and want, she turned and glared into his eyes. "What did you put on the bandanna? This isn't natural." Each ragged breath sent a fresh ping of sensation ricocheting through her body.

"You honestly don't understand what this is?" He sounded genuinely incredulous. "How old are you?"

"I'm not a fool. This is lust. But why... I've never..." His arms wrapped around her and slowly drew her toward him. She put her hands on his chest and arched away. "Stop it! I will not..."

He ignored her protest and applied gradual pressure until her elbows buckled and she collapsed into his embrace. Her face came to rest against his throat and Carissa inhaled his scent. Like cool mountain nights around a campfire, his smell was complex, evocative and so very different from hers.

“I did not drug you.” He paused then shifted her head into the bend of his arm so he could see her face. “You’re in heat. Try to calm down.”

She laughed, gripping the front of his t-shirt with one hand while her other arm wrapped around his body. His hips were lean and his back felt hard even through the material of his shirt. “You’re insane.”

“Are you a virgin?”

“Oh my God!” She twisted out of his arms and hurried away. “Are you one of those freaks who likes little girls? Sorry to disappoint you, asshole. That ship sailed years ago.”

“Then you’ve only been with humans?” His tone growled with obvious disapproval.

Her knees gave out and she caught the side of the truck for support as reality spun around her. He was there a second later, lifting her into his arms as if she weighed no more than a child. Closing her eyes made the vertigo worse, so she focused on his chin, refusing to think, determined to free her mind from the whirling.

When the world finally stabilized, Carissa found herself in the backseat of the truck again, only this time Quinn was with her. He sat to one side, and she lay half on the seat and half in his arms. He’d planned this, moved the seats forward to accommodate his legs!

“Let me go.” She tried to sit, but his arm tightened around her shoulders, holding her in place. Reality came crashing in. Ava had been kidnapped by werewolves or someone who employed them, and she was the prisoner of... She had yet to determine Quinn’s exact role in this nightmare.

“I know you’re frightened, but I can’t let you run.” His breaths seemed unusually deep and his gaze centered on her mouth, not her

eyes. “How strong have the impulses gotten? Did you try to ease the burning during the day?”

His arm felt solid and warm against her shoulders, his hand lightly resting against her upper arm. She wanted to touch him, slip her hand under his shirt and count the muscular ridges from his navel to his neck. “The ‘impulses’ only accelerate when you’re around.” She fisted her hands, refusing to give in to temptation. “Which makes it damn hard not to think that you’re the cause.”

“I am, but not in the way you mean.” He lifted her and pressed her against his chest. “Inhale my scent and tell me what happens.”

With her face flush with his skin, it wasn’t as if she had a choice. She tried to take short, shallow breaths, but each time she inhaled, calmness spread through her body. “How are you doing this?” she whispered against his skin, unwilling to abandon the comfort.

His fingers pushed into her hair and he raised her again, bringing her face up to his. “My scent will only work for so long. Very soon, you’ll need more. You’ll need this.” His lips brushed over hers, caressing without really kissing.

“No.” She shook her head. “If being around you is doing this to me, then—”

“It’s too late. It’s already begun. The cycle will continue until your body gets what it’s craving.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“A female’s first season generally grips her at a much younger age. You’ve been secluded from others of your kind, so your body didn’t—”

“Am I a werewolf?”

He shook his head. “The men in your house weren’t werewolves. They were Therian wolf-shifters. You’re a Therian shifter, but right now you’re latent. Your animal nature has yet to be defined.”

“Am I supposed to know what the hell you’re talking about?”

His smile was slow and patient and he swept his fingertips along the side of her face, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Let’s tackle one

problem at a time. We need to get your cravings under control before your scent draws a crowd.”

She covered her eyes with her hand, not ready to admit how easily her body could confirm his statements. Her core ached and her senses hummed. She was charged and ready for detonation, ready for sex! She needed a hard, thrusting...cock, filling her emptiness. The graphic word fit her mood, matched the urgency of her need.

His lips grazed her temple then drifted toward her ear, and tingles danced down her spine. “If you let me touch you, I think we can buy ourselves some time.”

With a distressed cry, she scrambled off his lap, surprised when he let her go. “When you left the store, things calmed down. Just give me a few minutes in the fresh air and I’ll be fine.”

“No you won’t.” His tone was absolute. “Your scent is too strong. You’re not getting out of this truck until we’re at my cabin.”

“Then you get out.” She stared past him into the night. If he would just leave her alone for a few minutes, she could bring down the intensity a notch or two.

“I know what you’re thinking, but it won’t work. Even if you managed to get yourself off—which you probably wouldn’t—the craving would still be there.”

“Then how will you touching me help?” she snapped, ready to crawl out of her skin.

“I’m not a scientist, but I know they’ve tried for generations to duplicate the chemical reaction produced by Therian heat. We’re shifters. Our bodies transform and change at will, which is something they haven’t been able to re-create in a lab.”

“What does that have to do with what I’m feeling?”

“You’re in heat, sweetheart. Your body is calling to mine. It’s producing pheromones and hormones and all sorts of other moans.” When she didn’t react to his attempt at humor, he went on in a serious tone.

“Then my body responds. Until you absorb the male version of the chemical cocktail, your body will go right on burning.”

Leaning against the opposite door, she drew her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her knees. “Are we talking saliva or semen?” She knew the answer, but she needed to hear it, needed to solidify the destination in her mind. Her abdomen was cramping so badly her entire body was starting to tremble.

“Both, and more besides. My body chemistry is changing, and so is yours. The cycle shifts our scent, perspiration, the oil on our skin, saliva, my semen, even our blood. It brings our bodies in sync, makes us more attractive to and more compatible with each other.”

“There is no way around it, no way to fight it?” Her shoulders shook and her teeth began to chatter.

“It’s hitting you hard, and this is nothing to mess with. Therian heat can escalate until the person literally goes insane.”

“Has that line ever worked for you before?”

Ignoring her sarcasm, he peeled her hands off her legs then pulled her legs away from her chest. “I promised to protect you. If that means protecting you from your own fear, then so be it.” With a few quick yanks he had her beneath him on the seat, one arm pinned beside her, the other above her head. “I will not hurt you, but we’re out of time.”

She whimpered as his face descended, more afraid of her reaction to him than she was of his kiss. His lips were warm and firm as they settled over hers. They rubbed and caressed for a long moment then parted, leading, as his tongue gently traced her lower lip.

He pushed his taste into her mouth with the first pass of his tongue over hers, and she moaned deep in her throat. His scent was exciting, but his taste sank through her being like warm, spiced wine. This was dangerous! Addictive. She did not have sex with strangers, no matter how good they tasted.

With a determined yank, she freed her arm from its trap at her side, but as soon as her hand found his shoulder, she forgot her purpose. His

arm was thick with muscle, his shoulder impossibly broad. Rather than deepening the kiss as she'd expected, his lips moved to the corner of her mouth where he licked and nibbled with maddening patience.

"We can't do this." The objection was more a reminder to her wayward body than a sincere protest for her companion. "I don't want to do this."

He pushed up enough to meet her gaze. "You need this. *We* need this. The longer we wait, the harder it will be for me to maintain control, and I'm plenty hard already." He rocked his hips forward, making it impossible for her to misunderstand his meaning.

She took a deep breath and dragged her gaze away from his face. He was too damn tempting. "I'm feeling better. I think I can—"

"You're feeling better because I just kissed you, and my scent is sinking into your pores. It won't last." He released her other wrist and pushed his hand under her head, curving his fingers against her skull. "Has my kiss calmed you?" His ink-black gaze drilled into hers, demanding honesty.

"Yes." He loomed over her, larger than life and infinitely more dangerous. And yet she wasn't afraid. He could have hurt her, could easily have forced his will on her. Instead he waited for her to accept the unbelievable truth. She was still struggling with most of it, but his kiss had definitely calmed her.

"Then part your lips and stop arguing with me." He added the last with the hint of a smile as his mouth returned to hers.



Chapter Two



Quinn trembled as his mouth moved over and against Carissa's. Each time she gently brushed his tongue with hers his cat tossed its head and roared, demanding he shred her clothes and claim her soft body with the inescapable thrust of his cock. He held her arms down more to avoid her touch than to keep her from pushing him away.

She responded readily now, matching the movements of his lips and tongue. He tried to take it slow, to savor the kiss as its own pleasure, not anticipate where it might lead.

Suddenly she turned her face to the side, tearing her mouth away from his. "I can't do this!"

Damn it. They were back to the beginning. She bucked beneath him, inadvertently grinding her mound against his leg. The carnality of her movements sent blood flooding through his groin, compounding the pressure already gathered there. He'd never ached this badly, never needed a woman—no, he'd never needed *this* woman as badly as he needed her now. Instinctually he knew that no other female would ever satisfy him after he'd tasted this one.

He shook away the fanciful thought. It was just the heat talking. A combination of chemicals designed to drive them crazy.

"I need..." She turned her face into the seat and sobbed.

"I know, love. Say the word and I'll ease your pain."

"Please." The word was muffled by the seat.

"Do you want me to touch you?" He had to have her permission, wanted no doubt between them that this was interactive.

“Yes!” Fury flashed in her bright-blue eyes. She was willing again, but she still wasn’t happy about it.

Knowing damn well that was as good as it was going to get, he rocked back on his knee and carefully unzipped her pants.

Her belly quivered and another sob escaped between her closely pressed lips. “I hate this.”

“I know you do.” He paused and soothed her with another long kiss. “I didn’t do this to you. You have no idea how abhorrent I find that thought.”

“But you can make it stop?” Her anger seemed to melt and she licked her lips.

“I can bank the fire. Give you some time to think.”

“I won’t lie here like a victim. I want to touch you too.” The admission sounded tentative and begrudging, as if she were still struggling with the fact.

“Not this time. If you touch me, I’m not sure I’ll be able to stop with just touching.”

She nodded and buried her free hand in her hair. She stared up at him with tear-bright eyes, but deep in the shimmering blue burned a need every bit as demanding as his. He pushed her shirt up, exposing her belly while leaving her breasts covered. She seemed confused by the choice, but he knew each inch of bared skin would make her feel more vulnerable.

He ran his fingers across her ribs, smiling when she bit back a giggle. Then one hand drew patterns on her silky skin while the other slipped inside her jeans. The denim was snug, even with the zipper down, so he accepted the inevitable. He had to pull them down.

Slipping his arm back under her neck, he teased her mouth with his. “I have a problem,” he whispered against her lips then tugged on one side of her jeans. She lifted her hips and used her free hand to help him. They didn’t stop until the material bunched below her knees, a makeshift binding for her ankles. “Thank you.”

He looked down her body and realized her panties hadn't slid down with her jeans. Not sure if it was a blessing in disguise or just another annoying obstacle, he kissed his way down her body. She trembled a little more the closer he drew to her panties, but the scent of her arousal filled the air. Definitely a blessing.

He kissed from hip bone to hip bone, occasionally touching her with the tip of his tongue.

"Just touch me already! You're driving me crazy."

Raising his head, he smiled. "Isn't that the point?" He returned to her belly, easing the satin bikinis down by degrees. He paused at each increment and explored the newly exposed skin. God, she was soft and the earthy scent of her arousal was making him dizzy.

Her thighs shook by the time he reached her mound. Rather than dragging her panties past the gentle protrusion, he pressed his mouth to her sex and blew hot breath through the soft material.

She groaned then whimpered. Then her hands were there pulling her panties down to bunch about her ankles with her jeans. "It hurts. Do you understand? I ache so bad it hurts." She rushed through the admission then collapsed back against the seat.

Her knees were bent and the best access to her sex was from below. He touched her ass just to let her know where his hand was then traced the intriguing crease upward, and lust crashed over him. She was sopping wet and incredibly hot. He gently worked his finger back and forth, venturing deeper with each motion.

Her belly tensed and she turned her face away again. Slowly he pushed his middle finger into her slick core and his cock bucked against the confines of his jeans. It was so easy to imagine how she'd feel if he... No! She'd given him permission to combat the pressure, nothing more.

Unable to resist the temptation, he leaned down and found her clit with the tip of his tongue. She started, her hips jerking, inadvertently driving his tongue deeper into her folds. Her taste coated his tongue and her scent filled his head. He wanted more! He wanted to bury his

face between her thighs and feel her come against his lips. *Not yet.* She wasn't ready for something that brazen.

He moved his mouth to her belly and slid his finger in and out. She lasted all of three rotations and then her inner muscles clamped around his finger and she arched with a powerful orgasm. He slid his thumb up to her clit and kept the spasms going as long as he could. She started to relax then tensed again as an aftershock sneaked up on her.

Through it all, he watched her face, captivated by the beauty of her surrender. She'd fought her need every step of the way, but in the end, she'd lost herself completely in the pleasure. And every tingle, every pulse played out across her expressive features, giving him a glimpse of what it would be like to claim her as his mate.

His mate? What was wrong with him? She wasn't meant for someone like him. Kyle never would have let him near her if he'd known she was in heat. If she was as important as Kyle thought, she would bond with an alpha, perhaps even a Prime.

Slowly withdrawing his hand from between her thighs, he pulled her pants back into place before he looked into her eyes. "Any better?"

She nodded, her face flushed, eyes still a little dazed.

"Will you be all right for a while or would you like some more?" he asked with a playful grin.

"I'm fine." She wiggled out from under him and zipped up her pants. Without asking permission, she crawled into the front seat, giving him a delightful view of her denim-covered ass.

He pushed open the door and sucked in a lungful of cool mountain air. Hoping she wasn't watching, he quickly licked her cream from his fingers, needing the hormone-rich fluid more than she could possibly know. His erection was still painful, but there was no help for it. He couldn't trust her to sit there quietly while he went into the trees and relieved the pressure. As if that would help anyway. He needed her, not some pointless release.

"How long will this heat thing last?"

With Carissa's taste lingering on his tongue and her scent imprinted on his brain, Quinn started the truck and tried to steady his breathing. His efforts to bank her fire had only intensified the need raging through him. He wanted her naked and writhing beneath him as he rocked between her thighs. Instead, she sat beside him, flushed and tense, cautious even after his steely control. The hunger was guaranteed to return. Hopefully, they'd reach his cabin before the next wave hit.

Driving up the banked trail and back onto the highway, he headed deeper into the mountains.

He'd thought this would be a simple "find and retrieve" when Kyle asked for his help two days before. Kyle was more brother than friend. They'd known each other their entire lives. So when Kyle's search went cold in the Colorado mountains, asking Quinn for assistance had been the obvious choice.

"Fine." She harrumphed, crossing her arms over her chest. "If we're not going to talk about the alien that took over my body, at least tell me where we're going and why you're so damn sure it's safer than my place."

He fought back a smile. He'd take a feisty female over a sullen one any day. "I'm not dodging your question. I'm just not sure how to tell you the specifics without explaining some basics first."

"While you're figuring out the basics, give me back my phone so I can call my sister."

"Kyle said her calls are going straight to voicemail. Her battery is probably dead." He dug her phone out of his pocket and handed it to her. She hesitated. The tension in her features made her dilemma obvious. "If you honestly think the police can help you, be my guest."

"They'd think I was crazy...or drunk," she muttered then activated the phone. She tried her call twice before she powered down the phone with a sigh. "Straight to voicemail, just like you said." She put the phone in her pocket and looked at him, her expression a combination of hostility and curiosity. "How do you know Osric?"

God, she was gorgeous. With a distinct widow's peak framing her forehead, her face took on an enticing heart shape. Her delicate features made her feisty personality even more surprising. The dim interior of the truck couldn't hide the flash of her eyes, though shadows stole their bright blue color. "I don't really know him. I'm here because Kyle asked for my help."

"Who is Kyle? You keep saying his name as if I should know who he is."

"He's part of the larger picture. It's best if we don't get caught up in the details."

"Fine. Then what does Osric want with Ava?"

"How much do you know about your father?"

She pulled the seat belt away from her chest and glanced out the window. He had the irrational urge to stroke her velvety cheek. He knew how soft her skin was and wanted to explore her warmth and texture as she wiggled and arched beneath him.

"He terrorized my mother and filled my childhood with fear." Her hoarse admission sent a jolt of compassion through his lust and focused his attention on their conversation. "The only way to escape his abuse was to convince him we were dead."

And the bastard she'd just described had Ava. He hoped the realization would help her understand the seriousness of the situation. "How did you accomplish the disappearance? The age of electronic transactions and video surveillance has made disappearing a lot more complicated than it used to be."

"We had help."

"Who helped you?"

Her eyes narrowed and her lips thinned. "It doesn't matter."

She offered no more information and he didn't pry. If he determined that past events directly related to the present circumstance, he'd revisit the subject later.

"You promised to explain what this is all about," she prompted.

She'd already seen the wolves shift. It was going to take more than another transformation to make her understand. "Your mother was born into a close-knit society, one with strict rules and expectations."

"You make her sound Amish."

"There are similarities, but the structure in our world was developed by necessity, not a fervent belief in religious traditions."

"Our world? Are you part of this 'close-knit society'?" A note of mockery crept into her tone and he narrowed his gaze. Her rebelliousness challenged his animal nature. If she kept it up, they'd never make it to the cabin. He'd find another place to park and drag her into the backseat so they could finish what they'd started a few minutes ago.

That wasn't fair. She wasn't an experienced Therian female issuing a sexual challenge. She was afraid and confused. And she knew nothing about their world. He raked his hair with his hand, determined not to give in to his frustration. "Kyle was supposed to do this. I'm a tracker, not a diplomat."

"Then why didn't you go after Ava?"

"You'd really rather be with the wolves right now?" Silence expanded as he fought for a simple way to explain all she needed to know.

"How do I know you're any better? You could be in this together for all I know." Uncertainty trembled through her tone, but her gaze remained challenging.

"In a way, I suppose we are. We're all after the same thing. But the wolves will take it by force while my clan would rather give you a choice."

"Your *clan*? What does that mean?"

He took a deep breath and repositioned his hands on the wheel. "We're all part of the Therian nation. I'm felinethropic. The two in your house were lycanthropic."

"They were werewolves?"

"Werewolves are different. They transform into a creature half human, half wolf. And they're bound by the cycles of the moon. A Ther-

ian can shift at will from human into animal. We're one or the other, not a mutated combination of both."

"You told Kyle you could still smell Osric. That doesn't sound fully human to me."

There was so much to tell her, but he had to stay focused on the major issues. "There are exceptions. In our human form, we can often access animal abilities, increased speed, feline agility, ultra-sharp hearing, that sort of thing. And some Therians can manage partial shifts. A wolf will manifest claws or—"

"*Felinethropic*. You transform into some sort of cat?"

He paused, trying to assess her reaction. Her expression was blank, her voice tense. He couldn't tell what she was thinking. "My mother manifested as a black jaguar and my father as a cougar. I can shift into either, but I'm strongest in jaguar form. Your father is a tiger and your mother... Well, now that's complicated."

One corner of her mouth twitched and she quickly looked out the side window. "Isn't everything." She wasn't buying a word of it. How had she gone from shocked acceptance to amused denial in under a heartbeat?

"They were both members of the Rocky Mountain Feline Network."

"That sounds like a motorcycle gang or an RV club." She returned her gaze to his face. "I've thought of another possibility. You're an illusionist, like one of those guys in Las Vegas. Good job, Quinn, your act is damn convincing."

"You're not taking this seriously."

She laughed and shook her head. "Did you really expect me to? I can't explain how you turned those two into wolves, but the rest of this is just stupid. I'm almost twenty-five. Why haven't I sensed my 'animal nature' before now?"

"Therian females are born latent." Why was he bothering? She wasn't going to believe him until he gave her visible proof of his claims.

Still, he wanted to offer her as much information as possible before the burning flared again. “It’s nature’s way of giving our race some sort of control over our future.”

A bit of her amusement ebbed. “I don’t understand.”

“Therian females can be ‘defined’ as any of the subcategories regardless of her parents.” He glanced at her then fixed his gaze on the road. “If one of the wolves had defined you—”

“I’d turn into a wolf rather than a cat?”

“Yes.” He sighed. She seemed to be listening, even if she wasn’t accepting what she heard.

For a long time she said nothing. He thought she might have dismissed the story outright, and then she said, “Even if all this is true, which I seriously doubt. How does it explain Ava’s abduction?”

“We’re almost there.” He turned off the highway onto an unmarked dirt road. “Let me prove to you that I’m not full of shit then we’ll get into all the details.”

“Are you going to turn into a panther for me?”

“Panther is a generic term for any black cat. I’m either a black jaguar or a yellow cougar. I’ll let you pick, but I’m wasting my breath until you believe the fundamental truth of our existence.”

She smiled, though wariness crept into her gaze. “This should be fun.”

His cabin was set back from the dirt road, a gravel drive leading to a detached garage. The steep A-frame design of both buildings kept snow from piling up on the roof as well as providing rustic charm. He activated the door opener and pulled into the crowded garage. With a trail bike, street bike and a wide selection of sports equipment, there was barely enough room left for his truck.

She shoved her door open as soon as he killed the engine. “My shoes are still behind the seat.”

After retrieving her shoes, he led her out the side door and motioned her toward the cabin. She paused to look around then reluctant-

ly obeyed. Even with a three-quarter moon, all she could see was the silhouette of the buildings and a shadowy impression of the surrounding trees.

A sharp, unfamiliar cry drew her attention skyward. Something massive passed over the moon then swooped toward them in a perilous dive. She ducked and covered her head with her arms, her shrill scream radiating into the darkness.

Quinn reached for the gun tucked into the back of his pants, but a booted foot kicked him squarely in the chest, knocking him backward. The winged creature turned on Carissa, spinning her to face him as he wrapped his arms around her struggling body. The intruder turned his head and offered Quinn a mock nod before launching himself into the sky.

Quinn watched in helpless disbelief as the woman he was supposed to protect disappeared beyond the treetops. “Unbelievable!” He dragged his phone out of his pocket and called Kyle. “He hired a freaking raptor! Did you know about this?”

“A raptor? Where are you? Do you still have Carissa?”

“I’m at my cabin. We stepped out of the garage and the fucking bird attacked us.”

“Are you sure it was—”

“Six foot six with a twelve-foot wingspan. Yeah, I’m sure it was a Therian raptor.”

“Is Carissa all right?”

He hated to admit his failure, but this was no time to guard his ego. “The raptor flew off with her.”

“Seriously?”

“No. I thought the story would amuse you.”

“Shit. Just shit!” The phone picked up a distinct crash, and Quinn wondered what Kyle had thrown. “I knew nothing about a raptor. There aren’t that many of them left. I’ll see what I can find out.”

Quinn blew out a ragged breath, needing an outlet for his own frustration. “They headed southeast, but even I can’t track a raptor.”

“Just hang out for a few. Let me see what I can learn.”

He didn’t doubt Kyle’s connections. He just hated being idle, even temporarily. “You have fifteen minutes then I’m out of here. Have you caught up with Osric yet?”

“I’m not having much better luck than you are.” Kyle’s laugh was harsh and humorless. “Ava gave his men the slip. Now it’s a race to see who can find her first, my team or the wolf trackers.”

“Where’re you headed?” Carissa’s deep blue eyes beckoned from his memory, her scent suddenly clear in his nose. He needed to find her. The possessive urge was palpable. He wasn’t even sure he could wait fifteen minutes. Thirteen, he corrected with a smile.

“Golden, but I need you to stick with Carissa.”

“That would be a whole hell of a lot easier if I could manifest wings.”

“I hear you.” Kyle sighed. “Keep your phone close. I’ll let you know as soon as I hear anything.”

“Copy that,” Quinn muttered, and ended the call.



FOR THE FIRST FEW MINUTES, Carissa couldn’t think beyond her terror. Then slowly her fear-muddled brain began to function again. She was flying! Well, actually the man who held her crushed to his chest was flying. She was hanging on for dear life while her lower body dangled like a ragdoll.

“Wrap your legs around my waist,” her captor advised. “You’re disrupting my rhythm.”

She bent her knees, but he had to help her maneuver her legs into position. “Why did you... What do you want with me?”

“Just relax. We’ll talk when we reach my house.”

House? She pictured a large nest tucked into the side of a steep rock face. Allowing the fanciful image to ease her anxiety, she pressed her face against the warmth of his chest and refused to look past his shoulder. He felt solid and warm—undeniably male—but her body didn't react to him the way it had to Quinn. Had Quinn's deep, thorough kisses and skillful caresses sated her hunger well enough to make her immune to others of his kind, or had her physiology already started adjusting to Quinn and Quinn alone?

When no definitive answer responded to her speculation, another thought materialized within her mind. They were real. And it wasn't just wolves. Shapeshifters not only existed, they appeared to be scattered all over the Colorado Rockies!

Cool currents of air washed over her with each flap of his massive wings, the surreal whooshing hypnotic and unnerving. She shivered, terrified yet exhilarated. She'd shed her jacket to escape the wolf, and Quinn had taken her shoes. No wonder she couldn't stop trembling.

A cat snatched her from a wolf, and a bird took her from the cat? This was starting to feel like a twisted children's story.

"We're almost there."

Had he felt her shaking? He was surprisingly polite for a kidnapper.

He glided out of the sky with staggering precision and landed on a railed wooden deck. She glanced at the large rustic house and the shadowy mountains surrounding them then turned her attention back to her newest captor. Light from inside the house provided her first real look at his face.

"You can let go now," he said with a gentle smile. She unhooked her ankles and lowered her feet to the deck. A violent shiver contracted her muscles and her teeth began to chatter. "You're not even wearing shoes. No wonder Quinn can't find a mate. This is no way to treat a female."

His wings shifted and swayed, gleaming in the moonlight. The brisk night wind ruffled the dark feathers. Were they brown or black?

A section of white striped the underside of each wing, adding contrast and definition. “You’re a Therian too?”

He folded his wings around her, drawing her close. “How could you tell?”

Heat cascaded through her body, stirring the embers of her desire, but the sensation fizzled out before it caught flame. Was he reacting to her scent? Holy shit, was that the reason he’d flown away with her? The wolves had noticed that she was...in heat, and Quinn had warned that she might “draw a crowd” if he didn’t calm her down. In heat. It was such a degrading phrase, so primitive, so animalistic.

She wiggled away, brushing against his wings as she scrambled backward. Though the structure of each wing was strong and obviously flexible, the feathers were incredibly soft against her forearms and fingers.

“Why’d you bring me here?”

“Let’s go inside. You’re shivering.” With a smooth, rolling motion, he furled his wings and motioned toward the sliding glass door. His wings hugged his back for a moment then were absorbed by his body, disappearing in a shower of sparks.

“How did you do that?” The cold forgotten, she moved behind him, searching for any hint of the massive wings that had propelled them across the sky. There were vertical slits in his garments, but overlapping edges made the openings subtle.

“How does a Therian do anything? I visualize the shape, pour energy into the area and manifest the change.” He took her elbow and guided her toward the door. “Come on, little fledgling. Your education has just begun.”

Stunned beyond words and having no idea where she was, she reluctantly followed him into the house. He guided her into the kitchen then his hand released her arm. Her skin tingled and her mind whirled, trying to process the rapid-fire changes.

“Coffee or tea? We’ve got to get you warmed up.”

How could he be so casual? Her entire life was in turmoil and he was offering her tea? “Whatever. Do you know what happened to my sister? She was taken from our house by some wolves.”

He shook his head, but the cunning gleam in his eyes made her suspicious of the denial. “I’m just helping out a friend. She asked me to go get you, so I went.”

Without the distraction of his wings, Carissa was able to concentrate on the man. He was tall and lean rather than corded with muscle like Quinn. His long hair was mostly blond, but dark strands threaded through the gold, making the overall impression shift from light to dark, depending on the angle of his head. He was actually better-looking than Quinn, so why did he fail to elicit the same urgent response from her hormone-laden body?

He held his arms out to his side and grinned. “Shall I turn around?”

“I want to be able to give the police an accurate description,” she told him.

“Tall, blond, with large brown wings?” His laughter was warm and infectious. “They’ll need a graphic novel illustrator, not a police sketch artist.”

She focused on his face, trying to ascertain his basic nature. With a wide brow, proud nose and high cheekbones, his features expressed nobility. Their gazes locked and stark awareness replaced his amusement. Amber slashed across his light-blue irises, branching out from the center like strikes of lightning against a midday sky. She needed to be careful not to encourage him. If Quinn were any indication of what she could expect, Therian men didn’t back down easily.

He looked so normal now. If she hadn’t seen it for herself, she never would have believed he could sprout wings and fly away. He was far less intimidating than Quinn, but she wasn’t nearly ready to obediently follow his lead. They’d gone to a great deal of trouble to capture her and she needed to understand why.

“Who’s your friend and why did she ask you to snatch me away from Quinn?”

“Was my assistance unwelcome?” He tilted his head and arched his brow. “I thought I was rescuing you.”

“So did Quinn. He swore he was protecting me from the wolves. In fact, the wolves promised not to hurt me too, so apparently I was never in any real danger.”

He dismissed her sarcasm with a wave of his hand and grabbed the tea kettle off the stove. “The wolves are muscle. They only do what they’re told.”

“Isn’t that the excuse you just used? ‘My friend asked me to do it.’”

Again he ignored her sarcasm. Instead, he filled a kettle with water and placed it on one of the burners. “Have a seat. I’ll be right back.”

Too restless to sit, she crossed to the window and peeked out between the blinds. All she could see was the shadowy outline of trees and a distant swath of starry sky. They hadn’t been in the air very long. It was unlikely they’d left Colorado. Still, running seemed foolish. She didn’t even have her shoes. She could try to steal a car. Did someone who could sprout wings even bother with an automobile?

And what about Ava?

Suspecting it was futile, she pulled her phone out of her pocket and tried Ava’s number again. The call went straight to voicemail as it had before, but she left a quick message just in case.

A soft, weighty blanket settled around her shoulders and she gasped, quickly slipping her phone back into her pocket.

“Easy now.” Her companion lightly squeezed her shoulders, his long fingers lingering for a moment before he moved away. If he was drawn by her pheromones, he was far more subtle about it than Quinn had been. He crossed to one of the cupboards and retrieved two ceramic mugs. “Chai spice, black or green?”

She turned to face him, amazed at how quietly he moved. He was big, well over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and long arms and legs.

“Anything hot will be welcome. I’m more interested in answers right now.”

“My friend’s on her way. She’ll tell you anything you want to know. She should be here shortly.”

For the first time since this nightmare started, Carissa didn’t feel threatened. Quinn had promised to protect her, had driven away the wolves, but his aggression and her body’s unexpected reaction to him made her feel vulnerable and unsure. This man’s laid-back attitude soothed her, encouraged her to relax and think. She allowed the worst of her anxiety to ease while remaining watchful and cautious.

“Am I allowed to know your name?”

“I’m Ian Douglas.” He took her hand and drew her away from the window. “Sit down and try to relax. You’re safe now. There’s nothing to fear.”

She wanted to believe him, needed to find some hope in this surreal mess. But even if she were out of danger, Ava was still missing. She sank onto one of the kitchen chairs and folded the blanket over her legs.

Her mind buzzed with questions and speculation while her memory replayed the scene in the back of Quinn’s truck. She’d never been kissed like that before, never come so quickly or so hard. And when it was over for her, he’d taken a deep breath and reluctantly moved away. He had to have been in pain. Her condition had affected his body too. So why hadn’t he suggested she return the favor or pressured her for more than a few heated touches?

In the past it had always taken forever for her passion to peak. Only one of her past lovers had possessed the stamina and caring to make sure she’d climaxed before he finished. This had been so different, so intense and elemental. Every sensation had been amplified by raw emotions, leaving her stunned.

Yet Quinn had been protective and selfless, focused entirely on her.

She shook away the sensual muddle and considered the situation at hand. What little Quinn had told her only made her more confused. “Do you know why Osric wants Ava so badly?”

“I do, but it’s better if we wait for Erin. She’ll start at the beginning and take you through everything step by step.” His suggestion allowed her to relax a little more. She hadn’t believed that anyone would involve themselves in kidnapping with no better reason than a friend asking for their help. His true motivation would likely be revealed with everything else the mysterious Erin was about to tell her.

He dropped a teabag in each of the mugs then filled them with water from the kettle. Long, lazy strides brought him across the kitchen, his gaze intent upon her face.

As her emotions gradually stabilized, her curiosity reengaged. Were all Therian men attractive? All she could remember of the wolves was shaggy hair and hurtful hands, but Quinn and Ian were certainly appealing. Well, Quinn more so than... She had to stop thinking about Quinn!

She took the mug from Ian with a wan smile and inhaled the spicy scent. “Who is Erin?”

Sitting in the chair across from her, Ian dunked his teabag several times before he answered. “She’s a good friend of your mother’s, or at least she was until your mother left the network.”

“Rocky Mountain Feline Network?”

“Yes.”

He’d said the word with factual calm, as if the concept was nothing out of the ordinary. “I thought lions were the only cats that live in groups. Aren’t the rest solitary by nature?”

“For the most part, they are. But Therians are also human, and humans are intensely social. Besides, there’s strength in numbers. Cats and birds are seldom considered allies, but Erin and I managed to find a common ground.” A doorbell rang and Ian turned his head. “That

should be her now. Let's go to the living room. It's warmer in there." He pushed back his chair and stood, waiting for her to do the same.

Keeping the blanket wrapped around her like a cape, she followed him down the hall. He moved with the same rolling stride she'd noticed before. He had to be at least six foot six, yet there was nothing gangly about him.

He motioned her toward the sofa as he went to answer the door. Carissa looked around, curious yet cautious. This was worlds away from a nest in the treetops or on a cliff face. Massive windows dominated the far wall, perfectly framed by tasteful drapes. A stone fireplace was centered in the adjacent wall, a built-in entertainment center surrounding it. The dark-brown leather sofa had a matching chair and loveseat. Huddled in the blanket, Carissa sat at one end of the sofa and wrapped both hands around her mug. She couldn't bring herself to try the tea. She didn't trust any of these people, but the heat felt wonderful against her palms.

Ian returned with a dark-haired woman who appeared to be in her mid- to late-forties. Dressed in jeans and a baggy sweater, she had an overnight bag slung over one shoulder and a tablet computer tucked under one arm. She looked ordinary, the kind of woman seen at a shopping mall or backyard barbeque. The newcomer paused in the archway, green eyes wide and tear bright.

"Look at you. You're all grown up." She rushed across the room and pressed her hand against the side of Carissa's face.

A soft, faintly floral scent crept into Carissa's nose. Instinctively she turned her face into the touch and inhaled. "I know you," she murmured, shocking herself with the admission. "I remember your scent."

"Of course you do." Erin pressed a quick kiss to Carissa's forehead then sat beside her, settling the overnight bag at her feet. "I was there when you were born. Your mother was my closest friend."

Carissa closed her eyes as memories rolled through her mind, flashes and disjointed scenes frozen in time. This woman's face appeared in

many of the images. Her hair had been longer, her face less lined, but her kind eyes and gentle smile remained constant, unchanged by the passage of time. She opened her eyes and watched the other two, not sure what was expected of her.

Ian moved to the fireplace and knelt to build a fire. Erin set the tablet on her knees and woke it up. Without explanation or introduction, she activated a video file then angled the device toward Carissa.

Her sister had been kidnapped and they wanted her to watch home movies? Carissa set her tea on the end table and clasped her hands in her lap, ready to give her temper free rein. Her mother's image came on screen and her heartbeat faltered. "What is this?"

"Just watch," Erin advised.

Willona appeared younger than the last time Carissa had seen her, by five, perhaps even ten years. Willona crossed her arms over her chest, hands absently rubbing. She looked at the camera then glanced away before composing herself enough to begin. "If you're watching this, then my plan failed. All the sacrifices I made to ensure your safety weren't enough." Tears shimmered in her mother's dark-blue eyes, and Carissa reached for the screen, wishing she could touch her mother's face, needing to reassure her, and be reassured by her. "Hopefully you're both adults." Willona shook her head and bitterness evaporated the excess moisture in her eyes. "You're likely about to turn twenty-five, and Osric has stepped out of the shadows. Since I'm not there to protect you, I've done the next best thing. This message should be delivered to you by a woman named Erin Lashton. If you recognize her scent, you can trust her. She is in the best position to help you now. Listen to her and she'll keep you safe. But know that I love you both with all my heart. You have been the only source of happiness in my life." With a sad, shaky smile, she reached over and turned off the camera.

"Wait." Heart aching with love and loss, Carissa turned on Erin. "How did you get this? When was it sent to you?" She pushed back

the memories triggered by the video. The situation was too volatile for a bout of melancholy. She needed to be strong right now.

“The original videotape was mailed from a small town in California fourteen years ago. I thought it might be a clue to your whereabouts, but Willona was too smart for that. I didn’t know when or if I would need it, so I digitized the recording.”

“Why is this happening? Why are all these people searching for Ava and me?” Her mother had said she’d recognize Erin’s scent and she had, which meant she could trust this woman. With a shaky breath to fortify her composure, she looked to Erin for answers.

“How much have they told you so far?” Erin reached over and took her hand, her touch light and calming. “Do you understand *what* you are?” She set the computer aside and pivoted toward Carissa.

“Quinn said I’m a Therian, a sort of shapeshifter. But how could I be completely unaware of my own nature? Shouldn’t I have sensed...something?”

“Many of our instincts are triggered by others of our kind. You’ve been isolated, carefully kept away from anyone capable of triggering these fundamental changes.”

Though Erin’s tone was soft and informative, defensiveness surged within Carissa. “My mother had very good reasons for what she did. Osric was abusive. He left her no other choice.”

“There are always choices.” She released Carissa’s hand and bent one leg, turning to face her. “I understand why your mother ran, but she did have other options available to her.”

“Such as?”

Erin took a deep breath before she continued. “What did your mother tell you about Osric? You were still quite young when she went underground.”

“He was physically and emotionally abusive, and she was afraid he would turn his aggression on Ava and me.” She drew the blanket more tightly around her, clutching the overlapping edges with both hands.

She didn't care what anyone said. Her mother had sacrificed her own happiness to provide a safe environment for her daughters. No one would ever convince Carissa otherwise. "Recent developments seem to prove that her fear was justified."

"Osric is a selfish bastard. I have no intention of defending him." Erin glanced at Ian before she added, "But I disagree with your mother's decision to rob you of your heritage, your biological identity. You are not human, and it's pointless to pretend you are."

Carissa let go of the blanket and rubbed her temples. Her muscles felt tight and her head was beginning to pound. Hopefully it was just stress. The last thing she needed was another bout of sexual cravings. "If Osric had never figured out where we were, is it possible Ava and I would have lived our entire lives believing we were human?"

"Possible, but not probable." Finished with the fire, Ian lowered himself onto the chair facing them. "All it would have taken is one of our kind walking into your shop. You are both well past the usual age for definition."

Definition? Was that the same as Therian heat? Quinn had seemed surprised that she had never experienced the demanding urgency before. Should she tell them about the hunger? Quinn seemed convinced the impulse would return.

Mistrust and embarrassment held her back. It would be wiser to learn more before she decided how much to tell them. "At what age are Therian females usually 'defined'? And what exactly does that mean?"

Ian looked at Erin. "Why don't you explain this part?"

"She's not going to like it no matter who tells her." Shifting her gaze back to Carissa, Erin took up the tale. "Therian males are born with an active animal nature while Therian females must be...activated, for lack of a better word."

"How is this activation accomplished?"

Another tense glance passed between Ian and Erin before Erin went on. "Using pleasure, pain or a combination of the two, the woman

is stimulated until her body releases a rush of hormones. Then she is given the blood of a male. Her body goes through a metamorphosis and her animal nature is established using the pattern in the male's blood. We call this definition."

"You make them sound like vampires."

Erin shook her head and offered Carissa a patient smile. "Therian definition is far more like human puberty than vampire transformation. For most, it's an exciting and celebrated event in a young woman's life."

"Each female is given until her twenty-first birthday to choose the male who will guide her through her definition. Most often it's a distant relative, but potential mates are also common," Ian told her.

Dread pulsed through Carissa as a picture began to form within her mind. The situation they described with such care had to have a dark side, something so intolerable it had motivated her mother's rash actions. "And if this female hasn't made up her mind by the time she's twenty-one?"

"The Alpha Council designates her guide," Erin admitted.

The simple statement unleashed a maelstrom of speculation and disturbing possibilities. Was the definition forced upon the female? Of course it was. Why else would there be a deadline? "Who did the council designate for my mother?" She shook her head as her stomach knotted. It was simple to see where this led. "It was Osric, wasn't it?"

"He had declared his intention to court her, and the council saw no reason to refuse him the opportunity." Regret threaded through Erin's soft tone and sadness clouded her eyes.

Carissa laughed, though she found no humor in the situation. "So Osric defined her by force then raped her repeatedly until he got her pregnant with Ava and me?"

"Basically." Erin reached for her hand again, but Carissa jerked it out of reach.

Throwing off the blanket, Carissa stood, glaring at one and then the other. “And his actions were sanctioned by this Alpha Council?” She shook her head. A cold, empty feeling threatened to extinguish the anger burning within her. “I can see why she ran. I would have done the same!”

“Kyle’s father still headed the network at the time,” Erin said. “He allowed many things Kyle will not.”

“Oh my God! Is Osric going to define Ava?” She pressed her hand to her throat as her heart slammed against her chest. “We have to stop this, now!”

Erin stood as well, compassion warming her gaze. “Fathers don’t define their children. That creates an abomination you don’t even want to think about.”

“But that’s what this is about, isn’t it? My mother managed to elude him, so he’s going to take it out on us?”

“It’s more complicated than that, but you have the basic idea.”

Her gut clenched and her mouth went dry. Their mother had lived like a fugitive to spare them these archaic rituals. “If he’s not going to define her, what will he do?”

“Broker the most advantageous match possible and let her mate define her animal nature,” Ian explained.

“That’s disgusting.” Her breathing became ragged and shallow as heat expanded within her. Not now. She would not allow her body to take over again. She was stronger than that, more determined. And she understood what was happening now, so the compulsion should be easier to control. “Do all the females in the network allow themselves to be treated like chattel?” She clung to her anger, using the familiar emotion to drive back the hunger.

“Most understand the reason for the guidelines and celebrate each event.”

A certain catch in Erin’s tone made her look into the older woman’s eyes. “Each event? Does that mean there’s more than one?” Her mother

had seemed certain events would be set in motion by their twenty-fifth birthday. There had to be some significance to that age.

“Therian females must choose their guide before they turn twenty-one and then they have four years to choose their life mate.”

Carissa’s mouth gaped, her mind refusing to absorb the implication. “And if they haven’t found someone by their twenty-fifth birthday, or if they don’t want to be mated for life, does the Alpha Council select a mate for them too?”



Chapter Three



Quinn watched the yellow lines on the pavement serpentine as he wound his way along the narrow mountain road. Waiting was nothing new to him. Every occupation he'd ever attempted required patience and attention to detail. He'd hunted for bounties before he'd been recruited as a tracker by the army. Twelve years in Special Forces, even his current freelance contracts all required methodical searches and extended stakeouts. So, what the hell was wrong with him?

He'd given Kyle fifteen minutes to call him back, but it had only taken Quinn seven to connect the dots. As Kyle had said, there weren't that many raptors left, and there was only one ballsy enough to stick his neck out for a cat. Ian Douglas. Quinn had little doubt of his identity. He just wasn't exactly sure where to find him.

Quinn's cat prowled inside him, restless and agitated, testing the limits of his control. He needed to shift, to run off some of this excess energy, but reaching Carissa as quickly as possible was more important.

Carissa's image flowed through his mind, her scent accompanying the memory. He could still feel her warm body arching into his as their kisses went on and on. Her skin had felt like velvet beneath his fingers as he slipped his hand inside her jeans. Why was the memory so clear and so intoxicating? Her taste still lingered on his tongue and he'd done little more than brush against her clit. Even now the thought made him hard in anticipation of a more intimate embrace.

His hunger should have faded as soon as the raptor took her out of range. He had only responded to the pheromones her body was secreting.

Unless you triggered her heat.

His fingers tightened on the wheel as the familiar accusation sounded inside his mind. It had been many years since he'd intentionally used his ability on an unsuspecting female. He'd never manipulated anyone who didn't deserve what they received, but who's to say he hadn't lost control? Had he inadvertently activated Carissa's heat?

He thought back over the sequence of events. He'd definitely felt awareness when they met. He'd wanted to take her from the shop and find a private place where they could indulge the desires pulsing between them. Her stubborn resistance fired up his dominant nature, but her lust had been spontaneous.

Danger spiked the reaction for both of them, but he'd only kissed her *after* her need became obvious.

"Okay, so you're not a complete bastard," he muttered under his breath. "She's nowhere near you now, so why are your balls still blue?"

Her wide, guileless eyes and kiss-swollen lips wouldn't leave his memory. She'd looked at him with curiosity and trust, rather than fear and resentment like other Therian females. Even after he'd kissed her into submission and caressed her until she came, she hadn't accused him of taking advantage of her. She'd been feisty and challenging, but she'd seemed to understand the restraint it had taken for him not to give her what she'd obviously needed.

Which led him back to Ian. What had Ian done when her hunger returned? Quinn clenched the wheel so tightly his knuckles turned white. Had the raptor understood that she knew nothing of Therian ways? Did he give a damn? Or had he taken advantage of her urgency and given her body what it craved?

Quinn's cat growled and tossed his head as possessive fury surged. He had to find her. Had to—

His phone rang, jarring him from his agitated thoughts. He glanced at the display, saw Kyle's name and sighed. "It's about time. You're an hour and a half late."

“Sorry. We cornered one of the dogs in Idaho Springs. After much persuasion, he still claims Osric only hired wolves.”

“All that proves is the dog didn’t know about the bird.”

“Maybe. But the possibility took me in another direction. If we aren’t dealing with a merc, then the raptor is probably local.”

“Which means Ian Douglas.”

“Damn. You are surly as hell when you’re asked to wait.”

“It’s been almost two hours! A lot can happen in two hours.”

“I agree, which is why I went straight to the source. As you know, my mother has an in with the raptors. I called to ask if she had any ideas. She didn’t answer, so I called the head of her security team. He said she’d already gone to bed. I told him to go wake her up.”

“And?” Quinn rubbed his eyes, wishing he could reach through the phone and shake the information out of his talkative friend.

“She gave him the slip,” Kyle informed.

“Which only confirms my conclusion. I know Ian lives in or around Snowmass. So where can I find him?”

“I’d send someone else if I could spare them. I know there’s no love lost between you two.”

“That’s the past. This is business. Text me his location. I’m already on my way.”



GAGE SEATON LAY ON his belly in the bed of his truck, peering through the scope of his M40A3. A rustic house nestled against the side of a pine-covered hill, the access road steep and winding. Beyond the wide, railed deck, in a deceptively normal-looking living room, his target was sipping tea while a female shifter indoctrinated her new recruit. And not just any recruit. He’d known Carissa since she was a child, and seeing her with these creatures had his finger itching for the trigger.

But he'd taken a vow. He only used his skills to protect now. And indulging his hate would be cold-blooded murder. He closed his eyes and eased his finger away from the trigger, waiting for the urge to mellow. Then dread jerked his eyelids open and forced his attention back to the disquieting scene. What if they intended to awaken her demon nature? As long as she was latent, she could be rescued. He could not allow the eagle-shifter to feed her his blood. As soon as one drop of his tainted blood passed her lips, Carissa would be beyond redemption.

The tall blond moved closer, his gaze narrowed and intense. He was eyeing her like prey. Gage fidgeted on the truck's bed, the situation making him more uncomfortable than the cold metal.

"Team Leader to Gama. Come in, Gama."

Gage touched his transceiver, seating the tiny device more securely in his ear. "Gama copy. Go ahead."

"Your check-in is overdue. What's your situation?"

"Sorry, sir." His instincts had led him to this location, warned him that something important was about to take place. Still, he'd been shocked to find innocent Carissa in the clutches of a Therian hunter. He'd yet to regain his composure. "Target located. Waiting for an opening."

"If your target is located, what's the hold up?"

Therian males were the source of the pestilence. They infected females, creating breeders to perpetuate their demonic species. Males were always fair game, but females, even transformed females, were considered innocent. The rescue teams didn't bother with transformed females, but according to Abolitionist standards, they didn't deserve to die.

"She's not alone, sir. Do I have permission to—"

"No. Collateral damage is not approved. Stick to original parameters."

"Understood." He wasn't pleased by the decision, but it didn't surprise him. Team Leader often lacked the stomach to do what must be

done. If the Abolitionist founders would allow their workers to be a bit more aggressive, the movement would be far more effective in the long run.

“Keep me apprised.”

“Copy that.”

“Team Leader out.”

Heaving a frustrated sigh, Gage rolled his shoulders then shifted back into his earlier position and waited for an opening.



CARISSA EDGED TOWARD the fire as she waited for the next shoe to drop. If Therian law allowed women to be defined against their will, it only stood to reason that arranged marriages would follow.

“According to Therian law, the council can appoint a life mate for a female on her twenty-fifth birthday if she has failed to select one for herself,” Erin admitted.

Planting her fists on her hips, Carissa glared at Erin. “I will not bow to these rules just because that’s the way it has always been. There are laws against kidnapping and rape. I’ll have all of these fools arrested.”

“You’re not human,” Erin persisted. “You need to start thinking like a Therian.”

Carissa stilled, eyes narrowing on Erin’s face. “If you agree with these ridiculous concepts, why did you send Ian after me?”

“I don’t agree with the old ways and neither does Ian or Kyle, but Kyle has only led the feline network for a few months. He’ll do what he can to protect you and Ava. I’m just afraid he won’t be able to control the older members of the council. Most of them see nothing wrong with coercing stubborn females.”

“Tell her the rest,” Ian prompted. “She deserves the whole truth.”

Erin looked decidedly uncomfortable, but she complied. “Kyle is my son, and my husband was head of the network when your mother chose to leave us.” She paused for a sigh then went on in an embarrassed

rush, “My husband and Osric contracted a match between Ava and Kyle shortly after Ava was born. Your mother objected. It wasn’t that she disapproved of Kyle. How could she? He was still a child. But she wanted Ava to have the freedom to choose her own mate.”

“Why Ava? Is Osric rich or something?” As Erin answered the questions, Carissa’s gaze shifted to Ian. Her nostrils flared and she nervously wet her lower lip. Could he sense the restlessness rising within her? What the hell would she do if it became as demanding as it had before?

“Females in your bloodline have a rare ability. They’re able to imprint more than one male.”

Carissa absently touched her lips, her gaze focused on Ian’s mouth. She needed Quinn! Needed...needed to pay attention to what Erin was saying! “I have no idea what that means.”

Erin looked from Carissa to Ian, understanding widening her eyes. “Is she in heat?”

“Oh yeah.” Ian shifted position, the bulge in the front of his jeans undeniable.

“Can you calm her down? She really needs to understand this.”

“Let’s find out.” He strode to Carissa and pulled her into his arms. For just a moment she melted into the embrace, and then his scent filled her head and she went wild. She shoved against his chest and violently arched away. “Settle down. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I am not doing this again!”

He stilled at her last word, his gaze narrowed and intense. “Again?”

“When did it start?” Erin asked, suspicion creeping into her expression.

“This morning.” Carissa turned around, but he kept one arm wrapped around her waist. “Quinn came into our store and... It felt as if an electric current passed between us. I’ve been edgy ever since.”

“All he did was talk to you?” Erin glanced at Ian as she waited for the answer. “He didn’t touch you or kiss you?”

“Why is this important?” Carissa evaded, trying to minimize her contact with Ian’s restraining arm.

His fingers splayed against her side, firm yet careful. “Quinn can intentionally trigger Therian heat. The council banned him from all network functions until he bonds with a mate.”

“What does this have to do with me?” She was missing something obvious, but rising desire kept her mind muddled.

“A female in heat is simple to track. Her scent is unmistakable.”

She turned back around and looked up at him. “Quinn did this to me?”

“It’s possible.”

“It’s probable,” Erin countered, bitterness hardening her characteristically mellow tone.

Anger cleared Carissa’s mind for a moment and she wiggled out of his arms. “Kyle sent Quinn after me. He had to know what Quinn would do. And Kyle isn’t doing this out of the kindness of his heart. He’s trying to recapture his betrothed.”

Erin reluctantly nodded. “When my husband died, Osric informed Kyle that the contract was null and void. Osric has begun negotiations with several other leaders, but Kyle is determined to—”

“Wait a minute. Osric thought we were dead. My mother made sure of it.”

“Your mother was fooling herself. The familial bond between Therians is strong. Osric sensed your mother’s passing and he’s known all along that his daughter was still alive.”

“‘His *daughter* was still alive’? Don’t you mean daughters?”

Ian shot Erin a cautionary look. “Slip of the tongue,” he dismissed. But Carissa wasn’t buying it. “Osric is just focused on Ava right now.”

With so many other knots needing to be untied, she let the inconsistency slide and tucked it away in the back of her mind. After a short pause she asked, “Why now? If he wanted us so badly, wouldn’t it have been easier to track us down as children?”

“He had no interest in children.” Ian watched her closely as if he feared she’d run. “You both turn twenty-five next week. If you don’t name your mates, Osric can make the decision for you.”

“Erin said *the council* selects mates for reluctant females.” She turned toward the fire, not wanting the warmth but needing a moment away from their perceptive gazes.

“The female’s father is allowed to make suggestions to the council. The council isn’t required to accept the father’s choice, but they often work together. Because of the contract dispute over Ava, the council approved Osric’s choice and sanctioned his actions.”

“Much to Kyle’s chagrin,” Erin added.

Carissa watched the dancing flames as she absorbed what she’d learned so far and allowed her mind to accept the implications. “And I’m next. Aren’t I?” She turned back around, too keyed up to remain still. “As soon as Osric finalizes the sale on Ava, he’ll open the bidding on me.” She rubbed her upper arms, trying to hide her hardened nipples. How much longer could she pretend this wasn’t happening? She raked a hand through her hair and started pacing. “I need to think. Why can’t I focus?”

“Ian, give us a few minutes. I need to talk with Carissa—alone.”

He looked as if he would argue then he nodded and left the room.

Erin unzipped the overnight bag at her feet and dug through its contents as she explained. “I wasn’t sure where you’d be staying or which challenges we’d be facing, so I tried to plan for everything. I brought a change of clothes, basic toiletries...and this.” She pulled out a plastic case and opened it across her knees. “Spray this up your nose. It should settle things down. If that doesn’t work, the vaginal cream will do the trick.”

Carissa took the nasal spray from her outstretched hand and looked it over dubiously. There was no label, no directions. “Where did you get this? What’s in it?”

“A synthetic version of what you’d get from a man. It’s not a cure. Therian heat won’t be denied, but this makes the cravings manageable. Many of us stopped being slaves to our hormones—and our men—a long time ago.”

“Do your men know about this?”

“Of course they do.” Erin laughed. “That’s why it’s forbidden. Most men enjoy the challenge of winning a mate, but there are still some who prefer women powerless. We were tired of ‘being treated like chattel’. Isn’t that how you put it?”

“So you kept producing it despite the ban?”

“Discreetly,” Erin stressed with a smile.

Desperate for any relief from the ache, Carissa placed the nozzle in her nostril and pulled down on the tabs, dispensing an odd-smelling mist into her nose. She sniffed, sneezed, and then sniffed some more.

“Do you feel any different?” Erin sounded hopeful.

“Not really.”

“Try the other side.”

She repeated the process and gradually her head began to clear. The ringing in her ears lessened and her temperature slowly lowered. “It’s working.” She no longer felt edgy, and the ache between her thighs subsided.

“Good. You can use it every few hours, but hold out as long as you can. Your body will eventually compensate for the chemicals and you’ll need the real thing, but this should buy you some time.”

“Do people really go insane from this or did Quinn just say that to frighten me?”

“It’s extremely rare, but it has happened. Our physiology is stubborn, our species determined to survive. The mist slows down the entire process, but again let me stress that it’s not a cure. You’ll need to find a sexual partner eventually. The cream works best at night or when the cravings are especially intense.” Carissa handed the nasal spray back to Erin and she returned it to the plastic case, then tucked the case back

inside the overnight bag. After zipping the bag, Erin crossed to Carissa and gave her an encouraging hug. “Get some sleep. You’ll feel better in the morning. More yourself.”

“Myself?” She laughed. “I don’t even know who that is anymore.”

Carissa sensed an undercurrent swirling around her as Ian walked Erin to the front door a few minutes later. The same electric sensation had prickled Carissa’s skin when the wolves lapsed into silence. Were all Therians telepathic? Could she learn to send and receive thoughts?

Had she just thought of herself as a Therian?

She didn’t want to buy in to this madness, but there was too much tangible proof that what they were saying was real. Her reaction to Quinn. The memories released by Erin’s scent. Not to mention the wolves’ transformation and Ian’s wings!

Ian strode back into the room and her thoughts scattered. Like embers disturbed by the wind, her body threatened to flame anew. She took a deep breath, hoping to reactivate the nasal spray. His gaze locked with hers, hungry and hot, and the rest of the world faded from view.

He crossed the room in silence and placed his hands on her shoulders. They inhaled together, as if on cue. He bent toward her, lips parted, ready to plunder. But her body rebelled, the throbbing suddenly painful rather than evocative.

This was wrong! She wanted Quinn, not just a Therian male. Her thoughts were clear enough to understand the difference. She shook her head, thrilled by this new level of control. “I’m not doing this.”

Pushing his hand into her hair, he slowly pulled her head back. “The longer you fight it, the more demanding it becomes. Do you want to lose control?”

She shook her head then rushed through her objections. “This is the twenty-first century. You can’t tell me there isn’t an alternative. There has to be a pill or an injection that will put out this fire!” She watched closely for his reaction. Did he know about the nasal spray? Or was he one of those who preferred his women powerless?

His hold remained constant, yet it only hurt when she tried to pull away. “Scientists have tried to duplicate the chemical reaction, but it’s different for each couple.”

That much must have been true. Erin said it wasn’t a cure, just an aid. A way to manage the unmanageable. “I think it’s too late. My body is already...”

“Shifting to accommodate Quinn?” He urged her backward, not stopping until the couch pressed against her calves. “How far did it go? Did he fuck you?”

Just the mention of Quinn’s name rekindled the heat. “It’s none of your business!”

“Did he hurt you?” He reached for her face, but she turned her head.

“No. To both questions.”

“When did he kiss you? In the morning at your shop or after he took you from your house?”

She glared. “Why do you care? He said it would return, and it has. Nothing else is important.”

He stepped back with obvious reluctance. “I told him I’d kill him if he ever used his power again. I need to know if he deserves to die.”

“I don’t know!” The harder she tried to concentrate, the more her body rebelled, but it wasn’t like before. She wasn’t aroused. Ian was still standing too close. She couldn’t think, couldn’t seem to catch her breath with him so near. “I don’t think so. Please get away from me. I can’t breathe.”

“What did Erin say to you? Did she—”

The musical crash of breaking glass interrupted his question. Ian pivoted as a massive black cat landed in the middle of his living room. Carissa gasped and sank to the couch, terrified yet captivated.

“Stay there!” Ian tossed the order over his shoulder as he turned to confront his uninvited guest.

Cold air gushed in through the broken window pane, rapidly lowering the temperature in the room. Ian stood with his legs braced, fists planted on his hips. His back sparkled then glowed as his wings manifested with a smooth rolling motion.

A sharp feline cry split the silence and she slipped off the couch, creeping to the left so she could see the intruder. The cat was huge, his black pelt gleaming in the moonlight. From his massive paws to the compact power of his hind legs, the cat emanated strength, agility and danger.

Without realizing why, she inhaled deeply, tilting her head as she scented the air. Ian's smell reached her first, but her brain quickly identified the cat's scent. She'd touched this man, breathed his breath and tasted his mouth. Even in cat form, her body recognized the intruder.

An odd thrill raced through her system. Hearing Quinn describe his jaguar and actually seeing him were two very different things. Her heart fluttered and her fingers tingled. She should be frightened, yet she felt energized and...excited?

Quinn's head jerked toward her, eyes glowing gold in the relative gloom. He made a low rumbling noise, tail high and swishing. Ian took advantage of Quinn's distraction and knocked him sideways with a vicious swipe of his wing. Quinn rolled and regained his balance, teeth bared in a menacing snarl.

"Stop it! Both of you." They paused and looked at her, bodies still tense and ready for battle. "If Quinn wanted to hurt me, he would have done so before you 'rescued' me. Our focus has to be Ava. This isn't helping anyone."

"He's in my house uninvited," Ian pointed out. "That's reason enough for me to kick his ass."

With hypnotic grace, Quinn flowed from cat into human form. His body rose and reshaped, leaving him naked and agitated. "As if you could take me—in any form!"

Ian swung his wing again, but Quinn was ready this time. Quinn ducked and spun, kicking Ian in the chest before darting out of reach. She watched the bunch and flex of their powerful bodies, mesmerized by the masculine beauty of their aggressive display. Fully dressed, Quinn had been marvelous. Naked, he took her breath away.

Ian grunted, rubbing his bruised chest as he drew back his wing for another violent swat.

Shaking away the momentary stupor, she yelled, "Cut it out!" She rushed forward, glaring at each man in turn.

"Did you trigger her heat, Jenaro?" Ian shouted, obviously unwilling to end the argument.

Resentment filled Quinn's dark eyes as he turned and looked at her. "I didn't touch you until after the fever rose. You were going crazy by the time I kissed you."

She tugged on the hem of her shirt. He was naked, so why did she feel exposed and vulnerable? "I didn't accuse you of anything. I told them I wasn't sure what happened."

"Them?" He turned back to Ian, hostility freezing his features. "Is Erin here? Her son would like to speak with her."

"I just bet he would," Ian snickered. "Did Kyle promise you Carissa if you help him find Ava? That will keep both Seymour sisters in feline control."

Quinn moved forward, eyes narrowed on Ian's face. "She reeks of you, old man! Did you define her or just—"

"Stop it!" She stepped in front of Quinn again and shoved him back with both hands. He might be unconcerned with his nudity, but she was becoming progressively more aware of him. She hadn't realized how muted the sensations had been with Ian until Quinn crashed back into her life. "He didn't touch me. Not that it's any of your business." Why was she provoking him? She knew it was dangerous even as the words slipped off her tongue. "I don't belong to you."

He grabbed a handful of her shirt and pulled her forward. “I say we take care of that right now.”

In an instant, Ian was behind Quinn with his arm wrapped around his throat. “Even I can smell her fear. Get your filthy hands off her.” His voice was calm and deadly, but Quinn didn’t seem impressed.

“Say the word, Carissa, and I’ll take you out of here. This raptor’s no match for me.”

Ian’s wing folded sharply, the tip aimed at Quinn’s head. Carissa leapt to the side, meaning to intercept the blow. The snap of fracturing glass sent Ian twisting to the side. Quinn lunged for her, but his reaction was a millisecond too slow. Searing pain drilled into her upper chest and the bullet’s momentum jerked her sharply to the left. She screamed, terrified and confused as the fire in her chest burned away her speculation.

Quinn’s lunge drove her to the carpet. Ian crouched over them, wings spread protectively. She cried out again as her wounded shoulder slammed against the floor and stars burst behind her eyes.

“She’s hit.” Quinn sounded angry, but fear made his dark eyes shine. “Get off me! I need to see how bad.”

“Stay down.”

Quinn’s only response was an impatient sneer.

With his wings still fully extended, Ian pivoted to the side and ran toward the window. His upper body bent low and he leapt through the gaping hole Quinn had left behind then shifted into an eagle in midair.

Even in her pain-induced daze, Carissa felt a rush of awe. “Why would someone shoot me? Doesn’t Osric need me alive?” She clenched her hands and fought back a scream as the agony sank deeper into her chest.

“You weren’t the target.” Quinn ripped her shirt open and examined the wound, worry etched into his features. “Fucking abolitionists.”

Abolitionists? The old-fashioned word swam through her mind, but her brain refused to provide a modern context.

“The bullet has to come out,” he said, “but bleeding’s our enemy right now.” Shooting to his feet, he rushed into the hall bath and returned with a stack of hand towels. “I’ve got to put pressure on it, and it’s gonna hurt like hell, so don’t bother trying to be brave.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and braced for the worst, but her startled scream still echoed off the walls. Pain radiated around his hand, and it felt as if he were shoving the towels clear through her body. “Stop! Oh God...”

“I can’t, sweetheart.” He kissed her forehead and the corners of her eyes. “I know it hurts. I’m sorry.”

“What are you doing?” Ian’s angry voice cut through the pain, but Quinn’s torturous pressure didn’t lessen.

“Get Erin back here. Now!”

The panic in Quinn’s tone sent dread rippling through the agony. She was dying, and there was nothing they could do to stop it.

“Look at me.” She forced her eyes to open and dove into his velvet-black gaze. “You are not going to die. I won’t allow it. We have unfinished business, you and I.”

Deep within the throbbing pain a spark of hunger ignited. The flicker sent soothing heat washing over her body, combating the harsher sensations.

“That’s right.” He kept his weight centered over the hand pressing down on the towels, so he could touch her with his other. “Our journey together has just begun. I have no intention of letting you go.”

She whimpered, tears escaping the corners of her eyes. “I need a hospital. A doctor, at least.”

“You need a *healer*, and Ian went to find one.”

“Erin is... Why am I...” A moan overtook her voice as a fresh wave of pain burned reality away. It lapped at her skin and sank into her flesh until she was a massive stinging flame, surrounded by the stench of death.



GAGE STOOD BESIDE HIS truck, hands clasped behind his back, expressionless features masking his fury.

Team Leader made no attempt to hide his anger. “How could you let this happen?” His booming voice echoed in the empty parking lot and Gage looked around. There were no surveillance cameras and no residential buildings nearby, but it wasn’t like Team Leader to be careless even for an instant. His voice dropped to a menacing whisper as he went on. “Why did you take the shot when Carissa was so close to the animals?”

He hadn’t been there, he hadn’t seen the look in her eyes when the jaguar demon transformed into a man. “They meant to defile her. It was clear. If I hadn’t acted, we would have lost her forever.”

“Instead we get to wait and see if those creatures can save her life! They’ll be on guard now. And they’ll still try to defile her, so how has our situation improved?” Team Leader’s voice rose again, growing louder with each new point.

“I’ll find a new vantage point and—”

“You will do as you’re ordered.”

Gage clenched his jaw and muttered, “Yes sir.”

The small show of deference seemed to calm Team Leader. He shoved his hands into his pockets and sighed. “Direct surveillance is too dangerous right now. They’ll have patrols out combing the woods. We’ll have to rely on my contact for updates. They can’t defile Carissa until she’s recovered from this mess. That should buy us a couple of days at least.”

“Yes sir.”

“Go get some sleep. You look like shit.” Gage nodded and turned toward his truck. “But don’t fool yourself for a minute, if Carissa dies, Nehema will come after you.”



Chapter Four



Tearing her gaze away from the bank of surveillance monitors, Dr. Carly Ides glanced over her shoulder and motioned her partner into the observation room. “You’re late.”

“It was unavoidable,” Osric muttered as he closed the door behind him. If his haggard appearance was any indication, his tardiness was the least of his worries.

She’d been an ambitious molecular biologist fresh out of grad school when Osric approached her at a popular bistro in Boulder. Her in-depth study of a rare genetic anomaly in the Rocky Mountain cougar population allowed her to network with a select group of scientists Osric needed to access. At first she’d thought he’d been hitting on her, but his frequent requests for technical information and obscure lab tests developed into a sort of undefined partnership.

Then four years ago their casual partnership became a whole lot more complicated when he presented her with “the opportunity of a lifetime”. He promised to make her part of a world beyond her wildest imagination, but first she had to sign an elaborate nondisclosure contract. Many of the things Osric brought to her previously had been intriguing and impressive, so she’d reluctantly agreed to his condition.

Hidden somewhere in the Rocky Mountain wilderness, the facility she’d been taken to was most easily reached by helicopter so she wasn’t sure of its exact location. Part high-security prison and part state-of-the-art laboratory, Carly hadn’t known what to make of her new home. She headed one of six teams housed within the closed complex. They weren’t allowed visitors and all their outside communications were

monitored. Except for the scientific personnel, everyone was military. However, the soldiers wore no rank designation or branch insignia. Carly wasn't even sure which country or countries were funding the unusual project.

Osric was treated with deference by the military personnel, but he frequently referred to the "backers". Carly didn't care about the power structure as long as it didn't interfere with her research, and the things she had learned since coming to the complex were staggering.

Shapeshifters weren't just fabled stories meant to entertain adolescents or frighten rebellious children. They existed right here in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. The project seemed focused on feline shifters, though they had three wolf shifter cubs who had been orphaned shortly after their birth.

If she could figure out a way around the damn nondisclosure contract, she would be the most famous scientist since Madame Curie! But two of her coworkers had attempted to leave the program and they had fallen victim to a mysterious accident. These people didn't bother with threats and ultimatums. They just made their disloyal employees disappear.

She glanced at Osric in time to see him scrub his lower face with his hand. What had the backers promised him, or with what had they threatened him? Why would he sell out his own people? She'd never actually seen him shift, but the only way he could know as much as he did about these creatures was if he were one of them.

Pushing the disquieting facts to the back of her mind, Carly returned her attention to the monitors. "I presume by your expression that you were unable to secure the all-important twins."

"Sarcasm is wasted when you don't know what you're talking about. The Seymour twins could advance this project by years."

"Only if they're available for testing." She looked at him pointedly. "Are they?"

“Not yet.” His lip curled in a silent sneer as he glanced away. “I still have men working on it. The situation is far from over.”

“And how long do you anticipate this process taking? You’ve been adamant that I not proceed any further with Devon until the twins are underway. How long am I supposed to wait?”

He looked at the monitors and snarled, “What the fuck are you doing? No one was supposed to touch Devon until I approved the procedure.”

“They’re not hurting her, I assure you.” Carly fought back a grin, her attention fixed on the erotic scene playing out on the screens in front of her. Carly had known heightened libido was a side effect of the drugs they were using to condition Devon’s mind. She had even planned to use Devon’s desire as motivation during her training. But when Devon had spent most of the morning frantically masturbating, Carly recruited three healthy young men from among the guards. Each had been given specific instructions. They could touch Devon with their hands and mouths, but under no circumstances were they to penetrate her.

Silence descended, tense and charged, as they observed Devon and her eager volunteers. All four were naked and physically fit. Devon’s long black hair and slanted green eyes gave her an exotic appearance that contrasted sharply with the military bearing of the three young guards.

“Did you anticipate this level of...sexual hunger?” Osric whispered, moving closer to the monitors.

Devon reclined in the arms of one man, kissing him deeply, while the other two caressed her round breasts and supple legs.

“I knew she would become sexually aggressive, but this is a bit surprising.” Carly crossed her legs, trying to ignore the pressure building between her thighs. If Osric hadn’t interrupted, this experiment would have been far more enjoyable. “If frequent doses create this sort of frenzy, it will be a serious challenge. However, if her body adjusts to the

chemicals and the demands become more manageable, her heightened appetite will work to our advantage.”

“If she follows orders, we’ll give her access to eager young men, but if she disappoints us, we’ll bind her hands and let her burn?”

Carly chuckled. “Basically. You warned me that she’s stubborn. Somehow, I don’t think she’ll be nearly as challenging as you feared.”

One of the guards knelt between Devon’s thighs and traced her slit with his fingers. She wiggled and squirmed, rocking her hips as he continued to tease her. Another knelt at her side, sucking one nipple as he squeezed the other with his fingers. Carly squirmed on her stool, wishing Osric would leave so she could give herself a good, hard orgasm. The guard between Devon’s thighs bent her knees and leaned down, tracing her slit with his tongue. Each time his tongue tip flicked her clit, Devon cried out and shivered, but the guard holding her in his lap kept her relatively still.

Carly heard the distinct clicking of a metal zipper and looked at Osric in horror. His gaze was narrowed and bright and fixed on her mouth. “Suck me, baby, and I’ll return the favor.”

Lust clenched her inner walls. She loved having a hot, skilled tongue moving over her folds and teasing her sensitive clit. But the thought of having Osric anywhere near her was disgusting. The man had the morals of an alley cat. And he wasn’t human! He’d never admitted that he was one of these creatures, but she knew he was.

“I’m on duty, and so are you.” She punctuated the reminder with a sharply upraised brow. “If you can’t maintain professional decorum, please leave the room.” Her chin rose as she turned back to the monitors, praying he’d take the bait so she could enjoy the display.

“I think you just like to watch,” he muttered as he zipped up his pants.

There was more truth to the claim than he realized. Carly was a confessed voyeur, and the scene before her now was a feast for the eyes. Devon straddled one guard’s face while she pumped the other two with

her fists. She looked like a pagan fertility goddess accepting worship from her lowly subjects. With her head thrown back, black hair streaming all around her, Devon undulated and rocked.

Carly looked at the young woman's face and groaned. Rapture. Devon's eyes glowed with golden light and her skin was deeply flushed. Her breasts quivered as she ground against the guard's eager mouth. She was abandoned, unashamed, utterly sexual.

The pulsing heat of an orgasm gathered deep in Carly's sex. She crossed her legs and clenched her inner muscles. All it would take is one careful pinch and she'd go off like a rocket.

"Come on. You can't pretend you don't want it," Osric growled. "I can smell you from here."

Stubbornly focusing on the monitors, she refused to let him intrude on her pleasure. Devon had brought two of the guards to climax with her hand and the third was trying to convince her to suck him off. Carly grinned. She had a much better use for that impressive erection than an unappreciative hand.

"The exercise is over, men," she said into the microphone. "Dress and return to your posts."

"But, Dr. Ides—"

"Samuels, report to my office."

A knowing smile curved his lips and he acknowledged the order with a subtle nod.

"I don't have to ask why you want to see him." Osric reached for her breast, but she twisted away. "You really think that pup can satisfy you better than I can?"

She ignored his rude behavior. The sexually charged atmosphere was her fault. "Why wouldn't Devon put him in her mouth?" The question was meant to divert his anger, but she was interested in the answer.

"He's not Therian. Even drugged and partially conditioned, she instinctively rejects his seed."

She tried not to let her fascination show, but the more she learned about these Therians, the more she realized how much more there was to know.



REALITY RETURNED IN stages. Quinn's familiar scent wrapped around Carissa, soothing her as tangibly as any hand. Or were his hands caressing her, patiently easing the pain? He'd kissed her so tenderly, his tongue possessing her mouth while his lips moved and meshed with hers. She licked her lips, hoping his mouth would descend and rekindle the magic. But she was alone.

She rolled to her side and groaned as pain erupted in her left shoulder. Memories rushed through her mind—Quinn's transformation from jaguar to man, the distant crack of gunfire and pain like she'd never imagined. And yet she lived.

Slowly opening her eyes, she peered into the darkness, trying to blink away the shadows. Uncertainty loomed all around her, threatening to overtake her momentary calm. Despite Quinn's scent surrounding her, she was in an unfamiliar bedroom, stripped down to a baggy t-shirt and a pair of panties. Who had undressed her? How long had she been unconscious?

She carefully sat and explored her shoulder and the upper portion of her chest. Though the flesh was tender, and the stiff muscles protested each movement, there was no bandage, no ragged scab or row of stitches. Ian had gone to fetch a healer, not a doctor. Therian ways were not human ways.

The door opened and Quinn slipped into the darkened room. "You're not supposed to be awake yet." He smiled, obviously pleased by her progress. "How do you feel?"

Her heart gave a little flutter in response to his presence, but there was no overwhelming urgency, no breath-stealing ache. Had the healer

stabilized her hormones, or... no, she could detect the distinct scent of the nasal spray lingering in her nose.

"I'm still pretty sore." She tentatively moved her shoulder, testing the accuracy of her claim. "But that's a significant improvement from how I was when I passed out."

"Erin's amazing." He sat on the edge of the bed, his expression tense and watchful. "But you owe Ian your life. Without his wings, Erin would have been too late."

She studied his face for a moment, fascinated by the conflict twisting beneath his calm exterior. "And you don't want to owe Ian anything." It was a statement of fact. Resentment and hostility crackled in the air every time they were in the same room. "What's with you two? What caused the bad blood?"

His gaze narrowed and his lips thinned. Not a good sign. "It's a long, involved story that I have no interest in getting into right now."

In other words, "butt the hell out".

"All right." As soon as she agreed to drop the subject, he scooted closer and reached for her hand. She was curious to see how her body would react to his touch, so she allowed his fingers to close around hers. His skin was warm and she was undeniably aware of the fact that they were alone in a bedroom, but the burning was banked, smoldering, easily controlled. Thank God for Erin's rebellious streak! "What's going on with Ava?"

"Nothing new. Kyle would have called if she'd been found."

She pulled her hand out of his grasp. That wasn't what he'd told her before. "Why does she need to be found? I thought Osric had her."

"She gave him the slip." His gaze shifted from her face with the admission.

Carissa caught her bottom lip between her teeth. Ava was out there, alone, being chased by God knew how many determined hunters. "Where's my phone?"

"Her calls are still going to voicemail. Calling her is a waste of time."

She knew he was right, but it didn't ease her trepidation. "They said Osric can sense us because he's our father." Actually they'd said Osric could sense his daughter, as if only one of them was actually his child. The detail didn't matter right now. She needed to focus. "Can I sense Ava, maybe contact her telepathically?"

"Have you ever sensed what she was thinking or known instinctively where she was?"

Had she? Their lives had always been routine. She'd never needed to guess where Ava was. She was either at the store or at home. Their mother had strongly discouraged any sort of a social life, and since Willona's death, there hadn't been time for one. "I don't think so. I know twins are supposed to have a sixth sense or something. We've always been close, but we were never like that."

"Are you identical or fraternal?"

"Fraternal. We still look a lot alike, but we're not identical."

"The full scope of your abilities will be released when your animal nature is defined. Until then, you need to concentrate on regaining your strength. You lost a lot of blood last night."

"Last night?" She tossed back the covers and crawled out of bed. The t-shirt only came to mid-thigh, but she was too upset to care. "It's not still night. It's night again?" She opened the blinds and looked out at the moon-bathed yard. "Are we still at Ian's?"

"Unfortunately. Erin put you in a healing trance. It was supposed to last through this night as well, but apparently it wasn't quite strong enough."

Questions pelted her mind, each a detail needing her attention. "What about our store? We have employees and suppliers. Breckenridge is a small community. People will notice if we just disappear. Reality isn't going to stop because we've—"

"This *is* reality, Carissa. You need to accept it."

"That's not what I meant." She released the plastic wand that controlled the blinds, but remained by the window. "What if one of our

employees reports us missing? I thought you didn't want the police involved in this."

"Good point. So call them and give them some excuse for why you're closing the shop for the next few days."

"I need my phone."

"It's two o' clock in the morning, sweetheart. We'll come up with something believable and you can make the calls in the morning." He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Do I need to carry you back to bed and find a way of keeping you there?"

A tingle dived down her spine and the soft cotton shirt felt rough against her sensitive nipples. Even without hormones commanding her responses, she found Quinn dangerously attractive. It would be so easy to tune out the world and pick up where they'd left off in his truck. His kiss had been like nothing she'd ever experienced before. She'd been desperate and wild, yet he'd held himself back, refusing to take advantage of her vulnerability. He'd been noble and selfless, so why were the others so suspicious of him? Either the others had misjudged him...or she had. And they had known him for years while she had only met him a couple of days ago. Damn it. How was she supposed to make sense of this jumble?

"What's an abolitionist?" She was being a coward, postponing the inevitable, but she wasn't ready to surrender another sliver of her humanity. Her Therian nature would control her soon enough. "I presume you weren't talking about the 'let's end slavery' kind."

His sigh stirred the hair above her ear and tension rolled down his body, easing him away from her back. His arms still circled her waist, but the embrace was looser now, far less intimate. "They're a group of religious zealots who 'rescue' Therian females. They believe we're the descendants of demons who either manifest as animals or have sex with animals. I'm not sure how they learned that our females are born latent, but they've made it their purpose in life to whisk them away and sterilize them before their 'demonic' natures can be activated."

Revulsion gripped her belly as she thought of all the girls who had been robbed of the miraculous potential of creating new life. They would never feel a baby move within their bodies or stand in awe of their babies' first steps. Then a personal possibility slashed through the general horror. "Was the man who helped my mother run away from Osric one of these abolitionists?"

"It's more than likely." He turned her around, his hands settling lightly on her hips. "What do you remember about him?"

"Not much. I was still a child when she threw him out for the last time."

"For the last time?"

"They had a sort of love-hate relationship. I think his name was Gabe or Greg or something like that. He seemed like a knight in shining armor at first, but he became really possessive, really fast. Mom would run him off when he started acting like a jerk. But he always managed to show up when we were in trouble, so she'd take him back, at least for a while."

"He was probably monitoring her."

"Yeah, don't they call that stalking?"

His features revealed nothing, as if he didn't want to influence her in any way. "What made her end it for good?"

She searched her memory, trying to recall every detail, every emotion. "I was so young. Most of it made little sense at the time, but the scene has replayed in my dreams for years."

"Don't try to analyze it, just tell me what they said."

"Mom refused to fight in front of us, but the apartment was small and we were curious little girls." She rushed on, wanting to share the facts before his bias tainted her memories. "They'd been arguing for weeks, but that last night was different. Mom was more than just angry. She seemed more focused, stronger somehow. She told him she'd met the conditions of their contract and we, Ava and me, had never been part of the deal."

“Sounds like standard Abolitionist tactics. Females are considered redeemed once it becomes physically impossible for them to pass on their animal nature. And with no contact with other Therians, most become too weak to shift.”

She absorbed the implications, allowing her adult mind to reshape her childhood memories. “You honestly think my mother agreed to have a hysterectomy in exchange for this man’s assistance?” Before he could respond, she widened her new perspective. “That means he wanted Ava and me to be sterilized too.”

“She was protecting you.” Emotion thickened his voice, but as usual, she couldn’t decipher his expression. “She might have been a bit misguided, but every move she made was meant to protect you two.” He shifted his hands to her shoulders as his gaze began to smolder.

Memories surged to the surface, supporting his conclusion. “I always wondered why Mom stopped running. We never stayed in one place for more than a couple of months while Ava and I were kids. Then we reached Breckenridge, and Mom just stopped. She bought a house and opened a business as if the danger had passed.”

He slipped his right hand inside her sleeve and stroked her arm. His touch was light, his fingers warm, and her senses came alive at his command. “If she’d had the surgery, she would have destroyed what Osric wanted as well as satisfying the Abolitionists, at least temporarily. The danger hadn’t passed, but she bought you enough time to grow up and become less vulnerable.”

“It all makes a sick sort of sense.” She looked into his eyes and felt awareness arc between them. The nasal mist might have slowed her body’s cycle, but he was still a ruggedly handsome man. And she was a woman who hadn’t had sex in a very long time. “If their primary interest is latent females, why didn’t they come after Ava and me?”

“They might have lost track of you or it could have been curiosity. You had no interaction with the Therian nation. Perhaps they wanted to see how long you could go on believing you were human. Or some-

one could have been protecting you. All we know for sure is as soon as Osric made his move it obviously set the abolitionists back in motion.”

“They meant to take out you and Ian so they could ‘rescue’ me?”

“That would be my guess. There’s no way one of Osric’s men would have taken a shot that close to you.”

He pushed her hair behind her back and pressed a kiss against the side of her neck, obviously losing interest in conversation. Another tingle skittered down her spine and her nipples gathered against the shirt. Perhaps her heat wasn’t as banked as she thought. No. That was a copout, a convenient excuse. She was an adult faced with an adult decision.—trust her instincts and spend the night in Quinn’s arms, or listen to gossip and send him away.

Her body was in full support of a passionate romp, but her mind was torturing her with uncertainty. “Why did I react so differently to Ian than I do to you?”

His eyes narrowed to glistening slits. “How did you react to Ian?”

“He didn’t touch me. I told you that already.”

“That’s not what I asked.” His thumbs dipped and swept the bend of her elbows as his gaze searched hers.

“The cravings returned right before you crashed through the window.” He grinned, utterly unrepentant for his brash actions. “Ian realized what was happening, but his scent made me...combative.”

The corners of his mouth twitched with a smile he couldn’t quite conceal. “It usually takes a full joining to trigger the process, but apparently our bodies have already started to sync.”

“Which means?” She licked her lips, her body rapidly winning the tug-of-war with her mind. “I’ll never want another man as long as I live?”

A sexy smile parted his lips and his teeth gleamed in the dimness. “We don’t need to be in sync for that. You just need to spend the night in my bed.”

She shoved against his chest in mock outrage. "You are such an arrogant jerk!"

He swept her into his arms and carried her back to bed. "Guilty as charged." Rather than toss her onto the mattress as she expected, he carefully set her down on the edge of the bed. His warm hands framed her face and his dark gaze bore into hers. "I want you so badly my toenails ache, but I will not hurt you. If anything we do causes you discomfort, tell me immediately."

His concern was unexpected and sweet coming from someone so massive and fierce. "I haven't decided if I'm going to let you do this." Heat cascaded from her head to her toes in a slow, melting rush.

He chuckled, drawing her back to her feet. "That sounds like a challenge." Her heart fluttered wildly in her chest. He didn't seem angry, but his expressions were so intense, it was sometimes hard to tell. His gaze swept up and down her body, as if he were deciding how best to begin. Without saying a word, he bent and tugged off his boots then sent his shirt sailing across the room. He unfastened his jeans, letting the well-worn denim ride low on his lean hips. Then he grasped the neckline of her t-shirt and ripped it open, baring her breasts as he slipped the ruined shirt down her arms.

"Was that necessary?" She tried to scold him, but her breathless tone ruined the effect.

"I didn't want to hurt your shoulder." His half smirk flashed again then his fingers traced the upper curve of her breast. "Does this hurt?" he whispered as his fingers spread soothing warmth across her skin.

"I ache, but not where you're touching."

"Is that so?" His hand descended along her torso, drawing tingles deeper into her body. He circled her navel then traced the lacy edge of her panties. "Take them off. I want you naked."

"But you're still dressed." She tugged on a belt loop to illustrate her displeasure.

"And I'm going to stay that way until I'm sure you're ready for this."

Emboldened by his care, she wiggled out of her panties and stepped into his arms. She was naked and breathless with anticipation. How could he doubt her desire for him? “I’m ready,” she whispered against his chest as her hands explored his back. He felt every bit as remarkable as he looked, hot and hard and...savage!

With an overt show of strength, he lifted her and she wrapped her legs around his waist. Her sex pressed against his rock-hard abs, creating the most delightful friction. She gasped and arched, rolling her hips into the unexpected sensations.

One of his hands clasped her bare behind while the other curved around the nape of her neck. She felt wild and wanton, sexy as she’d always wanted to be sexy. But she’d never been this daring before. He drew her mouth to his with a soft growl. The kiss started out slow and tender, as it had in the truck. But each soft slide of his lips and warm thrust of his tongue released a new spark into her abdomen. She raised her right hand to his hair and rubbed against him, increasing their contact skin to skin.

She slid her hand along the side of his face, letting the stubble on his jaw tease her fingertips. He went right on kissing her, his hand occasionally stroking her arm. She followed his lead and ran her hand up his arm, amazed by the heat of his skin. “Are you always this hot?”

He drew her hand to his chest and pressed it over his heart. “Only when I’m with you.”

His mouth settled over hers, guiding her lips apart. She pushed her hand back into his hair, enjoying the short, silky strands against her fingers. The kiss was soft and patient, his tongue brushing her lips without delving between. She responded, encouraging him to continue as the hunger inside her built. Their breaths mixed and their tastes melded as she slid her tongue against his, venturing into his mouth. He groaned and deepened the kiss, curling his tongue around hers.

With another throaty growl, he put one knee on the bed and lowered her to her back, then stretched out along her side and continued

their intoxicating kisses. Her nipples tightened, needing attention as badly as the rest of her body. He cupped her breast a second after the thought formed in her mind. Was it just the next logical destination, or had he sensed what she was thinking? She arched into the light caress, wanting the firm suction of his mouth yet unwilling to separate their lips.

She explored his arms and his chest, reveling in each discovery. His skin was warm, the dark hair surprisingly soft. She needed to feel him against her, over her, pressing her down into the mattress. The emptiness inside her expanded, intensifying the ache. A strangled cry escaped her throat and she pulled him toward her, urging him on top of her.

He knelt between her thighs and carefully drew her hands above her head. "Don't move." The directive was sharp and commanding. Gold suddenly sparked inside his dark eyes and his features blurred for a second before coming back into focus.

A sudden spike in her arousal dragged a groan from her throat. She wrapped her legs around his hips and rubbed her pelvis against him. Fire surged through her veins and her primal nature heaved, clawing its way toward the surface.

Through a lust-induced fog, she saw herself pinned beneath him. His hips pumped furiously as his teeth sank into her shoulder. But she wasn't repulsed or frightened by the image. Her being craved the frantic mating, longed for the savage pleasure hovering just beyond her reach. He intended to mark her, claim her, bind her to his body and soul—and her body was more than ready to surrender.

Trembling, eyes tightly closed, he held perfectly still and inhaled her scent. "We can't do this." He ground out the words between clenched teeth.

"Why?" The sensual cry in her voice brought his eyes open. "I want this, Quinn. I *need* it."

He unhooked her ankles and shook his head. "I'm too damn close to the edge. I'll define you and we both know it."

“I don’t care!”

“Yes you do.” He held up his hand, refusing to hear her argument. “Definition is forever. I won’t force that on you.” Without another word, he crawled off the bed, gathered his scattered clothes and left.

Her reason applauded his selflessness while her body burned. She’d never been so relieved and yet so disappointed. Barely able to think past the ache, she curled up on her side and let the tears flow. Her thoughts were too chaotic to sort and her emotions were even worse. All she knew for sure was she hadn’t wanted him to leave.

She spotted the overnight bag on a chair beside the closet and her mind latched on to the possible goal. A flicker of hope gave her enough strength to move. She wiped her tears on the back of her hand and eased her feet to the floor. She gasped then whimpered, refusing to think about how badly Quinn must be aching. Her fingers shook so hard, she could barely unzip the bag, but she quickly found the familiar case. Suspecting the nasal spray wouldn’t be enough to put out this fire, she grabbed the cream and headed for the bathroom.



Chapter Five



Carissa greeted Erin with a hug the following morning when the healer arrived to check on her progress. Carissa had been enjoying a hearty breakfast with the men, and Erin insisted she finish the meal before they went to Carissa's bedroom for a quick examination.

"Did you reach everyone on your list?" Ian asked as he warmed Carissa's coffee.

"I postponed the two deliveries and told Luke and Amanda we had a family emergency." She paused while she blew on her coffee. "They were both surprised by the news, being that they didn't think we had any family other than each other."

"But did they believe you?" Quinn asked, his jaw set, gaze intense on her face.

She was starting to recognize the nuances in his expressions. This wasn't annoyance. He was worried about her safety. "Luke would rather be making out with his girlfriend than working anyway, but Amanda asked a lot of questions. In the end, I'm pretty sure she believed me."

"Neither of them had heard from Ava?"

She looked at Ian and shook her head. "There's no way Ava would endanger either of them. Luke's in high school, and Amanda's a single mom. Amanda has keys to the store, so she's going to put a sign in the front window for me."

"We should have thought about that," Erin mused. "The last thing we need is the police snooping around."

The men nodded, neither of them looking pleased by their lack of foresight.

Though Carissa was glad to have headed off a potential problem, she couldn't help feeling she was aiding the enemy. No, her situation was a whole lot more complicated than Stockholm syndrome. She was in the process of redefining her concept of reality.

She took her dishes to the sink and thanked Ian for the meal, then led Erin to her bedroom.

Erin glanced at the tousled bed and concern overshadowed her calm. "Didn't the nasal spray work?" she asked after discreetly closing the door.

"It worked for a while, but Quinn is just..."

"Did he pressure you into—"

"No." She glanced away, embarrassed to admit how sexually aggressive she'd been toward the end. "If anything, I pressured him. He was afraid he'd lose control and define me, so we ended the night in separate beds."

"He wanted you that badly and just walked away?"

The disbelief in Erin's tone grated on Carissa's already frayed nerves. She'd been naked and begging, and still he walked away. He didn't deserve Erin's mistrust. "I know you don't like Quinn, but he was a perfect gentleman last night."

Erin scoffed softly under her breath. "Therian males are never perfect gentlemen. They're predators. They live by a code of honor, but they're territorial and possessive."

"Are you trying to frighten me?" Carissa licked her lips, still unable to meet Erin's knowing stare.

"Are you frightened?"

The unexpected question finally freed Carissa from her awkwardness. Even after the cream had extinguished the fire inside her body, her rebellious mind refused to release the images. She lay in the cold, lonely bed and imagined what it would have been like if Quinn had claimed her. He wouldn't have been gentle. He'd have drawn blood and held her down, dominating her as no other lover dared. But the aggressive act

hadn't been abusive or frightening. She'd needed each possessive thrust and would have reveled in his uninhibited passion.

"I'm beginning to sense things in myself that would have horrified me a week ago. I suspect I can be just as savage as any Therian male."

Erin smiled. "Good. You'll need to be if you're going to keep up with someone like Quinn."

"He swears he doesn't use his ability anymore." She sat on the edge of the bed, trying to ignore the faint woody scent threading through her own. "Why do you still dislike him?"

"If you could make any man alive so wild with lust that he would do anything you wanted, could you resist the temptation to use the ability?"

She was relatively sure Quinn hadn't used his power on her, but she had no way of knowing whether or not he'd used it on anyone else. "Nothing comes without a cost. Something made him stop, and I don't think it had anything to do with the council's dictates."

"Smart girl." Erin sighed. "We've wandered way off course. And I never said I don't like Quinn. He's my son's best friend. He can be very charming when he chooses to be."

"But you mistrusted him enough to send Ian after me." Carissa couldn't believe Erin's opinion was so important to her. They hadn't known each other very long. Even so, her mother's image hovered in the back of her mind, encouraging her to trust Erin, assuring her that Erin was in the best position to keep her safe.

"We both know it's the dark, dangerous scoundrels who make a woman's blood boil, but they're seldom the sort of men who make good mates in the long run. I just thought Ian was a better choice."

"Not for me." Finality rang through her soul, surprising her as much as Erin.

"Are you in sync with Quinn? I can't believe Ian gave up without a fight."

“They both said something like that. But I haven’t even slept with Quinn, so how could it have happened?”

“The stronger the attraction, the faster the couple syncs.” Erin’s gaze gleamed with hidden knowledge, revealing how much she wasn’t saying.

Refusing to be swept up in Erin’s enigmatic mood, Carissa said, “I’m just taking each day as it comes.”

“That’s probably wise. Now let’s take a look at your shoulder.” Carissa pushed to her feet and unbuttoning her blouse, she uncovered her left shoulder. Erin gently touched the newly healed skin, obviously shocked by the smooth surface. “The wound had closed when I left, but this is astonishing. What about internally? Is there stiffness? How’s your range of motion?”

Carissa carefully raised her arm and rolled her shoulder. “Range of motion is pretty good, but the muscles are still pissed off.”

The phrase made Erin smile. “I’d be pissed off too. You didn’t see the size of the bullet I pulled out of you. You’re extremely lucky to be alive.”

She caught Erin’s hand and waited until their gazes locked before she said, “Thank you. I’m still trying to absorb all this, but I sure as hell wasn’t ready to die.”

“Glad to hear it.” Erin winked. “I’ve got big plans for you.” Before Carissa could respond to this announcement, Erin went on. “I don’t usually say this so soon after such a serious injury, but don’t baby it. As long as the pain isn’t sharp, you don’t want to lose that range of motion.” She raised the blouse back into place and Carissa refastened the buttons. “Ian has a hot tub. Soak for a while before Quinn spirits you back to his cabin.”

“Is that safe? A hot tub is out in the open. Anyone could—”

“Ian and Quinn have combed every inch of this valley.” Erin gently squeezed her hand. “There is no one nearby. Besides, Kyle sent over some of his men to patrol the woods. You’re perfectly safe.”

Carissa ignored the dull throb in her shoulder that said otherwise and formed a weak smile. “What makes you think Quinn will spirit me away?”

“As I said, Therian men are possessive. He won’t want Ian anywhere near you until the bond is solidified.”

Which meant he’d want to finish what they started last night. The thought didn’t bother her nearly as much as it should have. It would be a whole lot easier to regain control of her life if she had control of her body. The nasal spray was less effective each time she used it. She was running out of time.

But what if Quinn couldn’t find enough control to stabilize her heat without defining her? Was she ready to sever her ties with the human world and free her Therian nature? And was she sure she wanted Quinn to be her guide?

After tucking the blouse into her jeans, Carissa asked, “Why do those two hate each other? Do you know what started the feud?”

“If Quinn wants you to know, he’ll tell you. But remember, some things are best left in the past.”

Carissa nodded, yet her curious mind wasn’t satisfied with the answer. It had something to do with Quinn’s ability. He must have used it on someone close to Ian. “Quinn didn’t trigger my heat, and he didn’t pressure me last night. I don’t know why everyone immediately thinks the worst of him.”

“I apologize.” Amusement twinkled in Erin’s eyes though Carissa didn’t quite understand the cause. “He’s obviously made quite an impression on you.”

“If I decided to bond with him—and I’m not saying I will—would he be accepted back into the feline network?”

“The ban would be lifted. Whether or not people would accept him is anyone’s guess. Tight societies like ours tend to create people with long memories.” Erin patted her hand and smiled. “I brought you

some more clothes and some other things you might enjoy. Do you have plans for the morning?"

"Except for an eventual soak in the hot tub, I'm entirely at your disposal."

They returned to the kitchen and found Quinn gone and Ian doing dishes.

"Quick, grab my phone. I want a picture of this," Erin teased. "I knew you could cook, but I always assumed you used paper plates."

He shot her a playful glower. "Not for guests."

"I'll be right back." Erin nodded toward the coffeepot on the counter. "Why don't you pour me a cup of coffee?"

Ian flipped open the appropriate cupboard as Carissa approached and she smiled at him. "Thanks."

"Sugar's on the table. Cream's in the fridge." Without so much as an inappropriate glance, he returned to his chore. It felt odd to be completely ignored after having men threaten to kill each other over her mere days before.

A low rumble of laughter sounded before he turned around. "It's only fair to warn you that I'm empathic."

"You can read my mind?" Heat blossomed across her cheeks and she swallowed hard.

"No." He leaned against the counter and tossed the dishcloth over his shoulder, looking more bartender than dishwasher. "I can sense your frustration that I'm behaving myself for the first time since we met. You're in sync with Quinn for the rest of this reproductive cycle. You'll only have eyes for him, so no one with any sense will bother trying to attract your attention. The average cycle lasts three months. Once your body resets—unless Quinn claims you—you'll go back on the market."

She snorted. "You make me sound like a foreclosure."

"I'm sorry." He grinned. "I almost said 'open for business.'"

His smile was infectious. She could see why Erin liked him so much. Quickly filling two mugs with coffee, she crossed to the table and sat.

Erin returned a few minutes later with a shopping bag and two photo albums. “The clothes are Devon’s. She’s off somewhere tormenting her brother, so she won’t miss them.” She sat across from Carissa and reached for the sugar bowl.

“Devon’s your daughter?”

“Yeah. She’s three years younger than Kyle, and she’s spent most of her life challenging one authority figure or another.”

“She’s still missing?” Ian walked across the kitchen but didn’t sit down. “I thought Kyle found her last Friday.”

“It was another false trail.” Erin shrugged, but her hand shook as she pushed the sugar bowl back to the middle of the table. “She still won’t answer her phone, but she sends me text messages every day or so to let me know she’s okay. She’s having a ball at Kyle’s expense.”

The grooves in Ian’s forehead didn’t relax. “Anyone can send a text, Erin. Are you sure she’s the one laying the false trails?”

Erin’s face paled as she stared back at him. “If anything were seriously wrong, I’d sense it.”

“Sorry.” He raised his hands, his smile not quite reaching his eyes. “I’ll go tidy the bedrooms or something.”

Erin snorted. “Smartass.”

Their interaction fascinated Carissa. They seemed part married couple and part best friends. “How long have you known Ian?” She waited until he’d left the room to ask.

“A very long time,” Erin said with a secretive smile.

“Are you two...”

“Oh God no. He’s like a son to me, or maybe a younger brother.”

“Is he younger than you? At first glance, I put him somewhere in his thirties, but there’s something in his eyes that makes me think he’s

older. Maybe much older.” Erin’s eyebrows arched but she didn’t confirm or dispute Carissa’s conclusion. “How long do Therians live?”

“It varies greatly by clan. Some clans are far more powerful than others.”

Carissa leaned against the back of her chair and glanced into her coffee. “I have so many questions. I’m not even sure where to start. How many clans are there? How many different kinds of Therians? Where do they live? Do any humans know about them...er...us? Wait. Before we even start this, Quinn keeps insisting that there is no news about my sister. What has Kyle told you?”

“He told me she’s on the run. Osric’s men had her for a couple of hours, but she climbed out a window and has been two steps ahead of them ever since. Unfortunately, she’s been a step and a half ahead of Kyle too. Your mother taught you well. Probably too well for this particular situation.”

“Is she still in Colorado? Where are they looking?”

“It’s easier to hide when you know the area, so they think she hasn’t gone far. You said she wouldn’t endanger either of your employees. Do you know anyone else who might be helping her?”

Carissa sighed and set down her mug. Just thinking about Ava tied her stomach in knots. Having her world redefined had left Carissa overwhelmed and shaken, and she’d had people to help her every step of the way. Ava was all alone, dealing with this threat the only way she knew how. Run and hide.

“Employees are as close as we get to having friends.” Carissa shook her head. “Our childhood was...unconventional, and running a business is time consuming.”

Erin paused for a several sips of coffee while she studied Carissa. “Don’t over analyze this question, just answer from your gut. Do you think Ava’s okay?”

Carissa searched her heart for only a moment before she responded, “I feel like I would be a lot more upset if she were in real danger.”

“Your instincts will sharpen, and once your animal nature is defined an entirely different world will open to you, but you are Therian. If the person closest to you in the world were in serious trouble, you would sense it.”

“It was like that with our mother. Ava and I both knew something horrible had happened long before we were told about the accident.”

“Then Ava is all right.”

At least for now. Neither of them spoke the words, but the fact hung in the air between them. “She’s out there, alone and on the run. She must be terrified.”

“Kyle will find her. He won’t stop looking until he does. And even if Osric finds her first, Kyle won’t let her be sold off like ‘so much chattel.’”

Carissa hid her smile with her mug, feeling foolish. “I shouldn’t cast judgment on things I don’t understand.” She looked at Erin over the rim of her mug then set it down and rested her hands on the table. “Will you continue my education?”

“That’s why I’m here.” Erin reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “Let’s take your questions one at a time. The Therian nation is divided into clans, which are scattered all over North America.”

“Just North America? Aren’t there Therians in other parts of the world?”

“There are, and we interact with them at times, but let’s focus on North America for right now.”

Erin was right. She needed to narrow the scope of her curiosity or she would never understand any of it. “Sorry. Please go on.”

“There are hundreds of clans and each has its own alpha. The twelve most powerful alphas make up the Alpha Council. The clans are also organized into networks—Rocky Mountain Feline Network, Southern Feline Network, Canine Network, and what I affectionately call the Others.” She laughed. “They’ve changed the name of their network so many times I’ve stopped trying to keep track of it.”

“Why do cats get two different networks?”

“Because we outnumber all other shifters one hundred to one. Wolf packs—they refuse to call them clans like everybody else—are next in number, but the ratio is still about ten to one.”

“I see.” She hadn’t expected anything so organized. “So Ian would fall into this ‘other’ category?”

An almost maternal pride shaped Erin’s expression as she said, “Ian is Raptor clan alpha. He’s also his network’s Prime.”

Carissa wished she had a pencil and paper so she could draw a diagram. She’d always been a visual learner. “Then there are four network Primes?” Erin nodded. “Is there some sort of Prime Council?”

Erin chuckled. “You catch on fast. Issues that aren’t settled at the clan level go to the Alpha Council. Anything that isn’t settled by the Alpha Council is ruled on by the Prime Council. When a Prime or an alpha brings forth an issue, he doesn’t vote. That way the councils never end up deadlocked.”

“And all this goes on without human interference?” Erin had said Therians were scattered all over the world. Carissa was still struggling to believe they’d been hiding in her backyard. She’d gone almost twenty-five years with an incredibly narrow concept of reality.

“There are two basic strategies—seclusion and blending in. The most common is a combination of the two. Most of the cat clans have settled in small, isolated communities, at times taking over entire towns. It’s not forbidden for anyone to choose a different lifestyle, but it is forbidden for anything they do to endanger other Therians.”

“What about the government?”

“They know shapeshifters are real. There have been too many of us taken to emergency rooms and morgues for them to ignore the evidence. Yet there has never been a public announcement, not a legitimate one anyway. So it must serve their purposes better for the general public not to know the truth.”

“Do Therians ever work for them as soldiers or whatever?”

“It’s not forbidden, but it’s generally an individual choice as opposed to a clan-sanctioned activity.” Erin’s smile was suddenly tight and not quite humorous. “Why don’t you ask Quinn about that? He has personal experience with the concept.”

Not wanting to overload her mind with facts and statistics, she motioned toward the photo albums. “What’s with the show and tell?”

Erin pulled the first album in front of her and folded her hands on top of the leather cover. “There is supposed to be a position above Prime, but there hasn’t been one since the sixties.”

“Why not?”

“Unlike alpha or Prime, which are achieved through feats of strength and aggression, an Omni Prime must possess a rare combination of Therian abilities.”

A hushed reverence crept into Erin’s tone, piquing Carissa’s curiosity. What did the photo albums have to do with this? “All right, I’m intrigued.”

“If you believe our legends, and I happen to, Cleopatra seized control from the male leaders of her time and became the first Omni Prime. She established the council structure still in existence today and ruled the Therian nation for many years.”

“Most of the Egyptian deities were part human and part animal. Are you inferring they were really Therians masquerading as gods?”

“I believe ancient Therians frequently preyed on the superstitions of humans, even setting themselves above them. Cleopatra challenged some of the most powerful humans in existence in an age when females were treated like property.”

“It’s a fascinating concept, but what does it have to do with me?”

Erin fiddled with the photo album, running her thumb along the edge then ruffling the pages. “A woman named Maggie was our last Omni Prime. She was remarkable, by far the most powerful Therian alive, yet her abilities barely qualified her for the position.”

Opening the album, she slid it toward Carissa and pointed to a picture near the middle of the page. Two smiling men had their arms wrapped around the slender blonde woman standing between them. All three were dressed in tie-dye tops and low-slung jeans.

“Maggie had three mates and she could shift into the animal nature of each,” Erin told her.

“She was defined three times?” Carissa shuddered. The idea of going through the ritual once had her squirming with dread and anticipation. But how had Maggie survived a three-peat of something so intensely savage?

“Definition is a one-time thing. Maggie absorbed all three animal natures at the same time.”

Eyes wide with understanding, Carissa tried not to look scandalized. “That must have been some wedding night.”

“Don’t confuse definition with sex. In Maggie’s case she was defined by her lovers, but it doesn’t have to be that way.”

Carissa’s heart was pounding and she wasn’t sure why. There had to be a reason for this history lesson. The situation was too dire for fun facts about the Therian nation.

“The man on her left is her first mate, Horst. He allowed her to manifest as a cougar.”

“A cougar?” She couldn’t help but smile. Hollywood had forever altered the meaning of the word. “She doesn’t look old enough to be a cougar.”

Ignoring her attempt at humor, Erin went on. “This was the sixties, so no one thought twice about a woman having more than one lover. The feline network was basically a commune back then.”

A certain wistfulness in Erin’s tone made Carissa wonder if her new friend missed the free-love era. “Who’s the other man?”

“Simon, her wolf mate. Horst and Simon were also lovers. Her third mate was a falcon-shifter named William and he was only intimate with Maggie. In fact William preferred not to have the other men

around when he and Maggie had sex. He insisted he wasn't jealous, but his actions said otherwise."

"So, Maggie could shift into a cougar, a wolf and a falcon. Why did that qualify her to lead the entire Therian nation?"

"It wasn't just the variety of shapes she could manifest. In human form, Maggie was stronger, faster and more creative than anyone I'd ever known."

"You knew her personally?"

"I was sixteen when she died. I don't know her exact age, but she was at least three hundred."

"Okay, I'm impressed. But I still don't see how this..." She pulled the album toward her and studied the image with new interest. If she ignored the clothes and shortened Maggie's hair... "She looks like my mother."

"That's not surprising. Maggie was your grandmother."

Carissa slumped back in her chair and blew out a shaky breath. "This is why everyone is hunting us. Osric wants... What exactly does Osric want?"

Erin reached across the table and slid the album aside then replaced it with the other one. "Osric has been obsessed with the legends surrounding the Omni Prime. According to some accounts, Cleopatra was not only an Omni Prime, she was a true Therian.

"As opposed to an *untrue* Therian?" All these convoluted stories were suddenly intersecting at her feet. Carissa wanted to bolt, to lock herself in her bedroom, or better yet, hotwire a car and drive home!

"Don't panic." Erin moved around to Carissa's side of the table and sat beside her. "Information is power. You can't make productive decisions until you understand all of the forces shaping this conflict."

"You're right. I know you are, but it keeps going from bad to worse. An arranged marriage was complicated by a looming definition, and now you tell me my grandmother was some sort of super-shifter. It's all a little much."

Erin rested her hand on the back of Carissa's chair, offering nearness without actually touching her. "Do you want to take a break? I can go find Quinn."

"No." She laughed. "Quinn tends to wind me up, not calm me down."

"Fair enough. Just a stroll along the deck then? I really don't want to overwhelm you."

"No. Go on. Tell me the rest."

Erin opened the album and motioned toward a picture similar to the one with Maggie and her mates. Carissa's heart fluttered then swelled with a complicated combination of emotions. Willona stood between two men, one blond, one with dark-brown hair. She looked young and carefree, so unlike the ultra-serious, ever-cautious woman Carissa had known. It took her a moment to realize the smiling blond man was Osric. "I didn't realize he knew how to smile," she muttered then turned her attention to the other man. "Who is he?"

"That's Samuel Collins." Erin waited until Carissa looked up to add, "Your father. He was a wolf clan alpha when your mother mated with him."

The floor fell out from under Carissa and her mouth gaped. "My mother had two mates?" She shoved the album toward Erin and stood, her chair scraping loudly across the tile floor. "I don't believe you. She could barely tolerate one. There is no way she would..." But they had hinted that she wasn't Osric's daughter. This wasn't a complete surprise. Her mind just shut down, refusing to process the possibilities.

"I have no reason to lie." Erin turned her chair and faced Carissa but remained seated. "Osric tried to create an alliance with the most powerful wolf clan through your mother. That's why the wolves are involved in the hunt. They're trying to find you."

"But they're hunting Ava!"

"Only because they know where you are. Once Ava is secured, they'll come for you."

“This is so damn comforting.” She covered her face with her hands, fighting back an exasperated scream. Every time she thought she was starting to understand, they threw her another curve.

She took a deep breath and lowered her hands, and found Quinn standing in front of her. His expression was both fierce and protective. “What’s going on?”

They were in sync. He’d felt her emotions spike. “Erin’s filling me in on my family history.”

Quinn’s expression didn’t soften. “If you need a break, she can wait.”

His concern pleased her. And despite what she’d told Erin, his intensity calmed her, allowed her to think. “It’s not Erin’s fault. She’s been wonderful.”

He pulled her into his arms and guided her face to the bend of his neck. She wrapped her arms around him and inhaled his scent, letting her lips press against his warm skin. God this felt good.

“Did she tell you about Maggie?”

Carissa nodded, unwilling to move away even far enough to raise her head. Quinn rubbed her back, one hand slipping under her shirt to stroke bare skin. “You’re safe, hellion. You don’t have to face these changes alone.”

“Is my father still alive? Why didn’t he ever try to find me?”

Quinn eased her back and turned her to face Erin. He leaned against the counter and Carissa leaned against him, his arms loosely circling her waist.

“Your father died eight months before your mother took off with you and Ava. If he’d survived, things might have been different. Willona might not have turned her back on the Therian nation.”

Carissa tensed. “You make her sound like a traitor. She ran away from an abusive husband. How is that a betrayal to anyone?”

“She did more than that.” Though Erin’s expression was almost serene, Carissa didn’t miss the cutting undertone in her voice. “She car-

ried the blood of the Omni Prime and yet she allowed herself to be sterilized.”

“It was the only way she could escape her psycho husband!” She lunged forward and Quinn gently pulled her back. “Let’s talk about Osric’s abuse. It was sanctioned by the Alpha Council. So who protects the helpless in your precious Therian nation?”

“This is why the Omni Prime is so important. Both councils are made up almost entirely of men. The Omni Prime is meant to be a balance, a feminine perspective threaded through the masculine power. Your mother pinched off the bloodline and ran away with Maggie’s last two descendants. I’m sorry, Carissa, but it was inexcusable.”

Quinn’s arms tightened and he kissed her temple. “Think before you speak,” he whispered into her ear.

Carissa trembled with the effort that it took to calm down. Who the hell did she think she was casting judgment on a battered, terrified woman? Willona had sacrificed everything to keep her daughters safe and this bitch called that “inexcusable”?

“Fuck you!” She twisted out of Quinn’s embrace and ran from the room.

Erin caught Quinn’s arm as he rushed after Carissa. He could feel the pain seething beneath her anger and it made inaction impossible.

“Let her go,” Erin insisted. “She’s internalizing way too much of this. She needs a good cry.”

“Then she can cry on my shoulder.”

She shook her head, fingers digging in to his arm. “She hasn’t had a minute alone since this began. Give her some space.”

“Ten minutes.”

“Fine. Give her ten minutes then let her tell you what an irrational bitch I am. Don’t defend me, she needs someone to vilify.”

“Like Osric isn’t enough.”

“She hasn’t seen Osric in a decade or more. Let her hate me for a while. She needs an outlet for all these emotions.”

Quinn couldn't hide his grin. "I can think of several ways to work off some steam."

"No doubt you can." She finally let go of his arm. "Kyle has always seen something in you that baffled the rest of us. I hope to hell he's right, because Carissa is incredibly important to our people. You need to help her understand that."

"I didn't set out to snag one of Maggie's granddaughters as my mate." He narrowed his gaze as familiar resentments rushed past his emotional defenses. "I was just helping out Kyle."

"Somehow I doubt my son saw it that way. He's always planning three steps ahead. Which is why I can't understand how Ava is eluding him." She pushed back from the table with a sigh. "I'll leave the albums for Carissa. Once she calms down, she might want to look through them."

"I'll make sure we take them with us when we go."

"Make her soak in the hot tub before you leave. Unless you have one at your cabin."

"Are you kidding? My cat throws a fit every time I take a bath. It's strictly showers for me."

"Well, she needs to soak her shoulder and that's easier to do in a hot tub."

"Yes ma'am." He offered her a smart salute.

Erin laughed and shook her head. "You and Ian really need to patch things up. You have the same obnoxious sense of humor."

Ian stepped out into the hall as Quinn saw Erin out. "Is Carissa well enough to travel? I presume you're not staying here." Ian had reached the living room by the time Quinn shut and locked the front door.

"Is that your way of asking us to leave?" Quinn folded his arms over his chest and glanced at the sheet of plywood that now covered the hole he'd made when he jumped through the window. A piece of cardboard blocked the bullet hole. The not-so-subtle reminder of Carissa's pain and how close she'd come to death made Quinn clench his jaw.

"*She's* welcome to stay as long as she likes."

"We both know that's not going to happen. Erin would like her to soak in the hot tub before we take off."

"Is that your way of asking if you can use my hot tub?" Ian laughed.

Quinn erased all hint of emotion from his expression and unfolded his arms. "May we please use your hot tub before we leave?"

"We? Are you actually going to climb into a hot tub? Most cats would rather lick themselves than shower."

"Most cats would rather lick each other than shower, but that's not really the point."

Apparently tired of verbal sparring, Ian smirked and headed for the sliding glass door that led to the deck. "I'll uncover the spa and back off the sentinels. Give you some privacy."

"Thanks," Quinn grumbled, shocked by the unexpected courtesy. It had been four and a half years since Ian had spoken to him. The last time they'd seen each other, Ian had been testifying before the Alpha Council, doing his damndest to make sure they banned Quinn for life. If it hadn't been for Kyle, permanent banishment would likely have been their judgment. But Kyle's defense of him had been every bit as fervent as Ian's slander. So now all Quinn had to do to be reinstated was find a woman willing to mate with a man who could create sexual frenzy in any Therian female.

With a frustrated hiss, he pushed his fingers through his hair and headed for Carissa's bedroom. Her emotions had subsided enough that he couldn't sense them anymore. That was good, but he missed the connection, the intimacy. Even if it was unintentional.

He tapped on the door. "You okay in there?"

"I'm fine." Her tone was muffled, but it didn't sound as if she was still crying.

"Can I come in?"

She pulled the door open and looked up at him, her eyes red-rimmed and blurry. "Is she still here? I should probably apologize."

Unable to resist the impulse, he leaned down and brushed his lips against her temple. “She’s gone, but she understands why you’re upset. This is too much for anyone to take in without erupting.”

She pushed the door wider but loitered in the doorway. She pressed against one side of the frame and he leaned against the other. The emotions swimming in her clear blue eyes twisted his heart in knots. If he wasn’t careful, he could feel a whole lot more than lust for this feisty little hellion.

“Doesn’t Erin want the same thing as Osric?” Her tongue passed over her bottom lip, drawing his attention to her mouth. “They’re both trying to create an Omni Prime.”

He jerked hard on his libido. She obviously needed to talk. “The difference is Erin wants to restore balance while Osric wants ultimate control. But you’re right. Both goals are achieved through the blood that flows in your veins.”

“What if I don’t want a mate, much less a male harem?”

He tensed. The idea of anyone else touching her, regardless of the purpose, was intolerable. “Don’t forget, definition is not a sexual act. That’s where Maggie went off track.”

“And my mother was emulating her?”

He started to speak then paused, not wanting to upset her again.

“Oh, don’t stop now.” She leaned the back of her head against the doorframe and closed her eyes. “I’m getting used to bad news.”

Did she really need to know the specifics? She’d likely piece it together on her own anyway.

She opened her eyes and arched her brows expectantly. “Well?”

“This isn’t anything you don’t already know, I’ll just fill in the details for you.” She nodded and he slipped his hand inside her sleeve, stroking her upper arm. “Your mother wasn’t emulating anyone. She didn’t have a choice. It was obvious she was resisting her calling, so Sam Collins and Osric negotiated an alliance. They waited until her deadlines passed and then they defined her by force.”

She pressed back into the doorframe, rubbing her temples with the heels of her hands. “I swear to God my head is going to explode. She wasn’t just raped? She was tag-teamed with full approval of the Alpha Council? I hate this place! I hate this world!”

He didn’t try to calm her or minimize her rage. He just stayed with her while she worked through her feelings, listening without comment as she railed.

“Men are pigs, and Therian men are the worst! How can this be allowed, much less approved? Why haven’t your women rebelled...or smothered you all in your sleep?” She punched him in the shoulder then swayed as the color drained from her face. “Will they do it to me?” she whispered, anguish in her eyes. “If I refuse to choose a mate, will they...”

“No.” He stepped closer, not sure if she’d tolerate his touch. “I would never allow it, and neither would Kyle. A lot has changed in the past twenty-five years. Most of the old guard has died. Kyle and the younger alphas are working tirelessly to modernize the Charter.”

She stilled, lips trembling as she looked into his eyes. “Is that law still part of this Charter?”

He wasn’t sure what made her ask, but she deserved the truth. “Yes. But Kyle has been very vocal in his opposition.”

“If Kyle brings the issue forward, he doesn’t get a vote!”

Damn. She’d been paying better attention than he realized. “It won’t come to that.” He touched her face, trying to capture her gaze again, but she wouldn’t let him. “I will not let anyone hurt you. Do you understand me?” She finally looked at him and the fear he read in her expression sent determination surging through his being. “I will protect you with my life.”

She blinked, releasing the tears gathered on her lashes. Then she reached up and kissed his mouth. It was the first time she’d instigated a kiss, and Quinn savored the spontaneous affection. His fingers moved into her hair, holding her steady while his lips mirrored her movements.

With a shaky sigh, she tried to pull away, but Quinn was far from satisfied. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her out into the hall, pressing her back against the wall. Her soft breasts flattened against his chest and their legs entwined.

His lips moved over and against hers, but his tongue teased, never venturing into the warm interior of her mouth. She made a soft, frustrated sound and grabbed the back of his head. Oh yeah. He wanted her wild. He wanted her so desperate she'd wrap her legs around his hips and let him take her right here in the hall.

Her tongue pushed past his lips and she explored his mouth. He let her play for a while then slid his tongue along hers and took control again. She rocked against his thigh and greedily sucked his tongue. He groaned into her mouth, imagining those petal-soft lips wrapped around—

“Jesus, you two. I gave you a room!” Ian sounded more amused than angry, but he didn't walk away.

“Did you need something?” Quinn glared and Carissa hid her face against his chest, her shoulders subtly shaking with silent laughter.

“The hot tub is ready. It's obvious I'll need to drain it when you're done.”



Chapter Six



The brisk mountain air contrasted sharply with the churning water in the hot tub, making the heat even more inviting. Carissa sank to her chin and watched Quinn pace the length of the deck, fascinated by the inherent grace of his strong body. Wisps of chlorine threaded through the pine-scented breeze, the combination sharp yet refreshing.

“You’re really not coming in?” she asked as his repetitive trek brought him near her again.

“My cat hates water. Besides, despite Ian’s efforts, we’ve got an audience. If I crawl in there with you, they’re guaranteed to forget what they’re supposed to be watching.” His dark gaze focused on her mouth. “I haven’t been real successful in keeping my hands off you so far.”

He’d been more successful than she had. If it wasn’t for his steely control last night, all of Erin’s lofty goals would be moot. Carissa’s nature would have been defined and the opportunity to create this famed Omni Prime would have been cut in half.

Quinn stared at her for a long moment then resumed his hypnotic march from one end of the deck to the other. Dressed in faded jeans and a black leather jacket, he looked ready to rumble. The phrase made her smile and her memory filled with images of his fighting prowess. He’d tossed enraged wolves around like stuffed animals, and challenged Ian without hesitation. There was no denying he had courage and stamina.

Stamina. The word made her shiver. Could he use all that contained power to make it last for hours or was he more like a flash fire? Scorching hot yet over way too fast?

She had to stop thinking about sex! She was supposed to be relaxing.

Sitting up straighter, she peered out over the fenced yard to the rocky slopes and shadowy trees surrounding Ian's property. Were there really other Therians out there, ready to attack any perceived threat? "Do you know who's out there? Can you always sense other Therians?"

"It's Jake and some of his men, and yes, I can sense them." He offered the fact without further explanation. Sunlight made his dark hair gleam and the wind accented its tendency to curl.

"Who is Jake and why are the men his?"

Quinn shot her a sidelong look, one corner of his mouth curving. "Jake Parlain is Osric's nephew, so I guess that makes him Ava's cousin. And his men have been following his orders since the Korean War. He's not technically an alpha, but it works for them."

"How often do Therian soldiers fight in human wars? Have you ever enlisted?"

"Enlisted?" Quinn chuckled. "None of us have ever enlisted. We've negotiated with various governments, securing a wide range of compensations in exchange for our services."

"Various governments? Wide range of compensations?" She sank into the water, suddenly feeling vulnerable. Therians were predators. In fact, they were apex predators, top of their food chain. Had she expected them to negotiate peace treaties or compose poetry? "You're mercenaries."

"A pirate with a Letter of Marque becomes a privateer. Mercenaries under contract for an extended period of time become a special forces unit."

"Are we still taking about Jake and his men, or are we talking about you?"

He approached the hot tub, resting his hands against the damp rim. "I work alone."

"And who's your current employer?"

“Kyle.” He smiled and glanced off into the distance. “Is that helping your muscles?”

“It would help more if you rubbed my shoulders.”

His gaze whipped back to hers and held. “I’ll rub anything you like as soon as I get you home. I’m not taking chances with your safety.”

“I’m pretty sure the only way someone could take a shot at me now is if they flew over in a helicopter. Are you sure you can’t convince your cat to ignore the water?”

“I can control my cat, but that wouldn’t take care of the audience. I don’t perform on command, and no one else is going to see you naked.”

As if to validate his concern, a man leapt the rail at the far end of the deck and came striding toward them. Dressed in a black leather vest and jeans, his long black hair ruffling in the wind, the stranger looked even more dangerous than Quinn. With both arms sleeved with tattoos and a two-day beard he’d blend right in at any biker bar or heavy metal concert.

Quinn didn’t react to Mr. Scruffy’s intrusion, so Carissa tried to relax.

“Is this what all the fuss is about?”

Sweeping his hand toward her, Quinn introduced, “Carissa Seymour, one half of the Seymour twins.”

“The smart half, apparently,” the newcomer grumbled then looked at her for the first time. His eyes weren’t brown as she’d first thought. They were a dark yet vibrant green. “Your sister can’t figure out friend from foe.”

“She has no reason to trust any of you.” She sat up a little straighter, not at all sure she liked this man.

“Jake’s just pissed because he’s been bested by a girl.” Quinn slapped him on the back and smiled.

“Two of my men have been bested. I haven’t joined the hunt. Yet.”

“I think it’s better if Kyle finds her.”

Jake threw back his head and laughed.

Even Quinn found her comment amusing. “Don’t worry, hellion. He’s one of the good guys.”

Quinn might have earned the distinction, but she wasn’t at all sure about Jake. “Did you need something, or did you just hop up here to see what all the fuss was about?”

Jake looked at Quinn, amusement shimmering in his eyes. “Is she always this prickly?”

“I don’t think she likes you.”

Completely unconcerned with her displeasure, Jake settled his forest-green gaze on her face. He studied her for a long, silent moment, making her feel like a butterfly helplessly pinned and on display. “I’m glad to see you’ve got spirit. You’re going to need it.” Without explaining his comment, he turned to Quinn and went on. “Fitzroy’s team is going to relieve us in about half an hour. Do you want them here or up at your place?”

“Isn’t there anyone else? I don’t want to put Landon in that position.”

“It’s gonna happen sooner or later. It’s been brewing for years.”

“I suppose.” Quinn crossed his arms over his chest, looking none too pleased with the conclusion. “You know his team better than I do. Can I trust them?”

“I have no reason to doubt them, other than the fact that they’re wolves. I’ve fought with Landon at my back more than once. If he trusts his team, that’s good enough for me.”

Quinn nodded, but his eyes remained narrowed, his expression tense. “Then tell Landon to head out to my place. We should be along shortly. And Jake, thanks for responding to Kyle’s call. I know your people are spread thin as it is.”

“I might not acknowledge my clan alpha, but Kyle’s my Prime.” Jake offered Carissa an unexpected smile then he moved closer to Quinn and continued in a low, rumbling tone. “You haven’t even marked her. What the hell’s wrong with you? This isn’t a game. We’re all so damn

restless we can hardly think and we're ready to tear into each other just to taste blood. Someone is going to claim her, probably tonight. If it's going to be you, get on with it!"

"It's none of your business. You're here to—"

"She seems partial to you, so I'll give you tonight. But this is your only warning. Solidify the bond. Get her hormones under control or the next time you see me I won't be so agreeable." Then he took off across the deck and hurtled the rail with preternatural agility.

She was pretty sure Jake hadn't meant for her to hear what he'd just said. If Quinn's thunderous expression was any indication, she'd be wise to change the subject. "What does Jake shift into? I've never seen a biker move like that."

Quinn ambled toward her, dark gaze shuttered. The tension around his lips was the only hint to his inward conflict. Jake had wound him up but good. He slipped off his jacket and placed it over the back of a patio chair. What was he doing?

"Jake manifests as a tiger, just like Osric."

A chill dropped down her spine. Osric was the shadowy figure who haunted her childhood. He was the name her mother had whispered when she was especially afraid. Knowing he was real, and imbued with Therian abilities, knotted Carissa's stomach and made her feel helpless.

Without explanation, Quinn pulled off his boots and his t-shirt then unzipped his jeans.

Understanding jolted Carissa and she scooted to the far corner of the hot tub. "You're...coming in?"

"Jake's right. Patience makes me look weak and that's not safe for anyone right now." He dropped his jeans and climbed into the spa without another word.

He'd moved so fast, her dazed mind barely had time to comprehend the sleek symmetry of his muscular body. She looked around in sudden panic, but she'd literally backed herself into a corner. The latticework privacy panels didn't appear that sturdy, but there was no

way she could break through one before he reached her. And she'd doubtlessly shred her hands and feet in the process.

As if to prove that escape was futile, his fingers closed around her arms and he pulled her up off the bench. Then one of his arms banded her waist and his other hand tangled in her damp hair. Half afraid of what she'd find, she looked into his eyes. Specks of light glimmered in a field of black, like golden stars twinkling in the darkest night. She opened her mouth, meaning to challenge his sudden strategy change, but he bent and captured her words with his parted lips.

Always before, his kisses had started out gentle, almost hesitant, as if he were afraid he would hurt her. No such caution tempered his kiss this time. His lips commanded and his arms clasped her half-naked body with obvious intent. She remained stiff and unresponsive for several seconds, but his breath stirred her senses and his rich, spicy taste drew her deeper into the madness of Therian hunger.

He tugged her t-shirt up and her breasts flattened against his chest. The contact sent darts of sensation deep into her belly and she gasped into his mouth. Of their own volition, her arms circled his neck and she returned his kiss with equal ferocity. Each time they touched, the heat seemed to flare even hotter than it had been the time before. If they kept playing with fire, sooner or later they'd be devoured by the flames.

His fingers released her hair and he slid his hand down, over the bunched material and along the indentation of her spine. Both his hands cupped her ass, drawing her up until her feet left the bottom of the spa. She wrapped her legs around his waist and clung to him, matching each stroke and swirl of his tongue with one of hers.

Sinking to the bench, he steadied her as she moved into a more comfortable position. She folded her legs to either side of his hips, allowing them to slide slowly outward until her sex pressed against the distinct ridge of his erection.

Automatically, she started to rock, rubbing herself against him. Her panties still separated their bodies, but it didn't seem to matter. Heat and a sensual current flowed into her body with each long stroke.

Their mouths separated as they both gasped for air. Quinn tore off her t-shirt and threw it to the deck. Then he bent to her breasts, his hands supporting her back as she moved faster and pressed harder, building the tension and accenting the heat. Water splashed his face, but he seemed oblivious as his mouth latched on to one side and then the other.

A sudden movement drew Carissa's attention to the sliding glass door in time to see Ian turn and walk away. Her hips halted and her hands grasped Quinn's shoulders. What were they doing? It was the middle of the day and they weren't really alone.

"What's wrong?" He looked up, his mouth hovering over one puckered nipple.

"Ian was watching us."

"That's the point, hellion." He nipped her just hard enough to make her gasp. "They all need to understand that you've been claimed."

Suddenly she felt other eyes upon her, hot with lust and aggression. She looked around and saw nothing to support the sensation, but she couldn't rid her mind of the feeling.

"I don't want to do this. Not like this." She tried to climb off his lap, but he spun around and pressed her back into the corner of the spa. Shoving against his chest was pointless. He was solidly wedged between her legs.

"I will never hurt you." He whispered the words against her trembling lips. "Can't you trust me by now?"

She searched his eyes, confused by his actions yet soothed by his words. Every time she'd been unsure, he'd pulled back, controlling his own need through sheer force of will. But it couldn't go on forever. One of these times his control was going to snap, despite his good intentions.

He kissed her gently as his hand pushed back into her hair. Then he pulled her head to the side and his mouth fastened onto her neck. His lips moved against her skin for a moment then his tongue painted warm, wet patterns within the circle of his lips. Tingles danced down her arms and across her chest as his mouth began to pull. Pressure built beneath his mouth as if he were sucking all the blood in her body toward that one spot.

"It hurts!" She tried to push him away, but his fingers only tightened in her hair.

Suddenly he released her flesh and sensations shot down her spine and lodged between her legs. She yelped in surprise and pleasure as the intensity rippled out in tingling waves. It hadn't been an orgasm, exactly, but so damn close it made her crave the real thing.

He raised his head and their gazes fused. His blazed with Therian light. She shrank away, knowing he was struggling for control of his cat. "Trust me." He mouthed the words as his fingers slipped free of her hair.

If he were in control, why didn't he let her go?

He guided her arms to the rim of the tub then draped her legs over his thighs. His legs were bent, knees resting against the bench without actually climbing up onto it. Even in the churning water, she could see his massive erection.

Torn between excitement and dread, she glanced beyond him and caught the telltale gleam of Therian eyes scattered among the trees. His fingers brushed against her crotch and she gasped, shivering despite the warm water bubbling all around her.

He eased her panties aside and slowly pushed two fingers into her cream-slick passage. His eyelids drooped and he growled low in his throat.

She closed her eyes and let the pleasure wash over her ragged nerves. His thumb found her clit, sending heat spiraling through her

abdomen. Then he pulled her closer, his fingers pushing deeper into her core.

“Make it look good,” he urged, his voice barely a whisper. “I’ve got no leverage unless I move my hand.”

Understanding flowed through her like warm honey. She drew her hips back and his fingers slid nearly out. Then she pushed forward and he rewarded her with his thumb. She opened her eyes and pressed her lips together to keep from crying out. No, she shouldn’t hold back. The others needed to know she had a protector, that she’d been “claimed”. The word sent a thrill through her body and she moved a little faster, savoring the slide of his fingers and the careful brush of his thumb.

His gaze flared suddenly and his arm wrapped around her hips, driving his fingers deep as he turned around. She folded her legs as she’d done before and settled across his lap, his hand still situated between her thighs.

“Ride me, hellion. I want to feel you come.”

She moved her knees closer to his hips, so she could slide up and down. He guided one of her hands between them and pressed her fingers around his thick shaft, his need more than obvious.

Desire blasted through her as she matched the demanding movements of her hips with her firmly clasped hand. His fingers felt good deep inside her, but his cock would feel so much better. “Should I just—”

“No.” His free hand wrapped around the back of her neck and brought her mouth toward his. “I will not share our first time with anyone.”

She wasn’t sure this was much different, but the sentiment was sweet. Their mouths pressed, tongues boldly sliding, as she tuned out the rest of the world. His fingers filled her, thumb skillfully propelling her toward the looming peak. She squeezed his fingers with her inner muscles as she imagined the thickness of his shaft deep inside.

With a sharp cry, she came, body trembling, mind lost to everything but the pulsing pleasure. He kept the spasms going with his thumb, but gradually she realized he was still hard within the circle of her fingers.

“You didn’t—”

“Doesn’t matter. Let’s get the hell out of here.” He eased her back and drew his hand out of the water, his smile full of secrets. “Guess Ian was right. He will need to drain this thing before anyone else uses it.”

A particularly cold wind gusted across her torso. She shivered then crossed her arms over her breasts. “Damn, that wind is cold.”

“No, you’re just unbelievably hot.”

Before she could respond to the compliment, he set her on her feet and climbed out of the tub. His movements were slower now, and her hungry gaze drank in every bulge and ripple of his magnificent body.

With the help of the chilly wind, he managed to look semi-hard as if he’d just spilled his seed inside her. Guilt panged within her as she realized how badly his body must ache. This was the third time he’d brought her to climax without a similar release. She couldn’t let him do it again. Either they made love or he had to stop touching her.

He dried off with one of the beach towels and quickly pulled on his jeans. Then he turned back to Carissa. “Come on. It won’t get any easier.”

She looked at the trees, but Jake’s men—or was that Jake and his men?—were nowhere in sight. Everyone present had already seen her breasts and the wind was turning her blue.

She climbed out of the tub and Quinn wrapped one of the towels around her, then hurried her toward the sliding glass door. He went back for the rest of the clothes as she slid the door open and retreated into the waiting warmth.

By the time he joined her inside the house, her teeth were chattering. “Hot tubbing is almost not worth it when you have to go through that to get out.”

Piling his clothes to one side of the door, he grabbed a blanket off the couch and ambled back to her. "Get those wet panties off and I'll warm you up."

She didn't hesitate. He held the blanket up behind her, creating a mini changing room. Tossing the beach towel aside, she wiggled out of her panties then kicked them onto the towel. She wrapped her arms around him and moaned at the pleasure. His body was warm and solid against her chilled skin. Heat sank into her muscles and a violent shiver shook her shoulders. She snuggled closer and he closed his arms around her, cocooning her between the blanket and his chest.

"You were out there too," she murmured. "How do you stay so warm?"

"Cats are naturally hot-blooded, or Therians can control energy. Take your pick."

She heard muffled footsteps behind her and the sudden tension in Quinn's body told her it was Ian.

"I gathered her stuff while you were outside. Everything is by the door."

Quinn's chuckle sounded forced. "Damn. You are in a hurry to get rid of us."

"As soon as you're gone, I'm going to close up the house and join the others at the sanctuary. We're being pulled in too many directions right now. I'm going to make sure Erin is safe while Kyle is hunting Ava."

She didn't like to think of Ava as being hunted, but that's what they were doing. Kyle's men and the wolves were stalking the same prey, trying to beat each other to the takedown. She turned within the circle of Quinn's arms and looked at Ian.

"Thanks for all your help."

"Not a problem." He didn't quite meet her gaze, seemed uncomfortable with her now. He'd just seen her having sex with another man. That was bound to be a bit awkward.

So why did she feel more secure than ever before?

“Please tell Erin I’m sorry I lost my temper with her.”

“She knows what you’re going through. There’s no need to apologize.”

“Will you anyway?”

He finally met her gaze, a smile curving his lips. “As milady commands.”

“Then we’ll get out of your hair.” Quinn scooped her up, blanket and all. “We’ve obviously overstayed our welcome.”



GAGE LEANED HIS ELBOW against the tabletop and stroked his chin. Team Leader might have sidelined him for the time being, but that didn’t mean he was ready to forfeit the game. It wasn’t in Gage’s nature to give up on anything.

According to his mother, tenacity had been part of his nature since birth. The Marines had shaped his stubbornness with discipline and routine. He’d mastered skills that served him well now, but the battles he’d fought in Grenada and Kuwait hadn’t satisfied his need for glory. The motivations of his superiors had been too convoluted for true heroism. He was determined to find a role that would allow him to shelter and protect as the knights of old had defended those less fortunate than themselves.

Team Leader had approached him nineteen years ago while he was still in the Marines. Gage had been attracted to purity of the Abolitionist cause, but regular paychecks and full benefits were hard to let go. Still, rescuing helpless females and preventing these demonic abominations from reproducing was a reward far more valuable than material comforts. There was no moral ambiguity in salvation. Without his assistance, these females would not only suffer in this world, they’d be damned to an eternity of hell’s fire after they died. So, Gage had left the Marines and sworn allegiance to the Abolitionist cause.

Willona's lovely image fueled his determination, still vivid after four and a half years. She'd pushed him away long before her death, but he'd kept tabs on her, watching from afar as she struggled to rear her daughters alone. If his lifestyle had been more conducive to a permanent relationship, he might have tried harder to resolve their differences. No, it was better that he'd just let her go, let her enjoy the life she'd purchased with blood, sweat and tears.

After Willona had fulfilled her contract with the Abolitionists, Nehema had ordered that Willona be left alone. It was surgically impossible for her to reproduce and the girls were no danger to anyone as long as Willona kept them away from Therian males.

But Willona had died and the demons returned to claim their lost females. Nehema had dispatched a rescue team as soon as she learned of Osric's plans, but the demons had arrived first.

Gage had promised Willona he'd keep her daughters safe. Even after they went their separate ways, he'd been determined to keep that promise. But he'd failed. There was no way for him to escape that fact. And now, if he didn't act quickly, Carissa and Ava would be dragged back into the savage world Willona had fought so hard to escape.

Gage didn't know the identity of Team Leader's contact, but it didn't matter now. Gage had no intention of sitting on his hands while the girls slipped farther from his grasp. The raptor's defenses had been breached. The location was compromised. The creatures had no choice but to relocate Carissa. But where would they take her?

Knowing their twenty-fifth birthday was approaching, Gage had been gathering intel for months. He spread out the photos, considering each location. The Wildlife Sanctuary was the most defensible setting, but it was also the least discreet. The raptor's house had been his first choice and his instincts had been correct.

Irritation surged through his focus. This hadn't been the first time his instincts had salvaged a floundering mission. Why wouldn't Team Leader acknowledge his value? If Gage hadn't been two steps ahead of

the other operatives, the jaguar would have defiled Carissa. No one else was even close! Yet he was the one Team Leader chastised. He was the one sent home.

With a deep, calming breath, he cleared his mind and stabilized his emotions. Team Leader's incompetence would have to wait. The only thing that mattered now was saving Carissa. The only reason he'd followed Team Leader's order in the first place was because sleep deprivation had affected his aim. His shot should have taken out the raptor, even with their unexpected gyrations.

Well, four hours of sleep had steadied his hands and cleared his vision. His friend had warned him that they appeared to be preparing to leave. Even the raptor was deserting the nest. Now Gage needed to choose his next target.

He picked up the picture of an unassuming cabin, nearly concealed in the trees. This was the jaguar's home, and it would take several hours to drive there. He'd already spent seven hours attempting to sleep. He wasn't willing to squander any more time. His instincts were telling him to go to that cabin, and he intended to listen.



QUINN'S CABIN WAS SMALLER than Ian's house, and even less coordinated. Ian's vaguely Southwestern décor would never earn industry accolades, but at least the furniture matched. Carissa looked around Quinn's rustic living room, trying to decide if it deserved a groan or a giggle. The deep-cushioned sofa was black while the wood-framed chair and ottoman were burgundy. A wood-burning stove nestled in the far corner of the room, adjacent to an ultramodern entertainment center. It was all rather...eclectic.

"I don't spend a lot of time here," he muttered as she continued to stare.

Rather than irritate him further, she asked, "How is your security better than Ian's? His house seemed more secluded."

“Secluded doesn’t always equate with security.” He motioned her toward the loft situated above the small kitchen. A curtain obscured her view, so she climbed the ladder and pushed the material aside. His large, warm palm cupped her rear and gave her a playful push. “Keep going.” He’d moved up behind her, his breath teasing the small of her back. “I’m losing interest in the tour.”

His arm wrapped around her thighs and he started to pull her against him, so she scrambled up into the loft. Two and a half hours on the road had given them plenty of time for small talk and wistful smiles. They both liked classic rock and action flicks. He didn’t share her fascination with the paranormal, but she pointed out that paranormal was passé for a Therian. The light, stress-free mood had been so welcome she hadn’t asked any of the questions lingering in the back of her mind. But her curiosity wouldn’t be denied any longer.

Quinn pulled out one of the chairs from the wraparound desk and offered it to her. She sat back and watched as he activated the multi-screen computer system. It seemed rather elaborate for a home office. The monitors flickered to life with images from popular online games and she couldn’t help but smile.

“Is this how you spend your days?”

“No, but it makes a convincing cover for this.” He entered several commands into the keyboard and the computer shifted modes. The animated warriors and busty fantasy heroines were replaced by real-time images of the cabin and a data access screen.

“Holy shit.” She rolled closer to the desk. “Why do you need this sort of security?” One monitor was divided into four smaller sections, each one displaying an interior shot of the cabin. The other three monitors displayed external shots. Even the access road, which was a deterrent in itself, was covered by surveillance cameras. He unlocked a drawer on his right and withdrew several small black objects. They were about the size of nine-volt batteries, and had no obvious controls. “What are those?”

“Proximity transceivers. I need to give them to Landon and his men or they’ll set off the alarms.” He put the transceivers in his pocket as she took it all in. “It’s easy to make enemies in my line of work.”

“Which is?” She swiveled toward him as she waited for his answer.

He paused, hands resting lightly on his thighs. “I’m a hunter, helion. You know that.”

“But what do you hunt? Bounties?”

“At times.”

“Fugitives?”

“Yes.”

“Criminals?”

“Yes.”

“Helpless women?”

He snickered. “Are you really going to and try and convince me you’re helpless? I have the scratches on my back that prove otherwise.”

Heat crept up her neck onto her cheeks as their escapade in the hot tub rolled through her memory. Never before had she been so uninhibited, so demanding, so...ready to have sex with a veritable stranger while others watched! “Did I really scratch you?” Or had he brought up sex to derail her curiosity?

“I’ve been thinking about last night and this morning.” He pushed back from the desk and swiveled to face her. His gaze fixed on her mouth and he spread his legs, pulling her toward him chair and all. “Did Erin do something creative while she healed you? Did she accelerate the end of your heat cycle or... Why do you suddenly have more control over your body than I do? And in the hot tub, I was screaming for release, but I couldn’t come.”

What was he talking about? Last night she’d had no more control than he’d had. She’d been wild for his touch, ready to let him define her if it meant he’d stay in her bed. For long hours after he’d left, she lay there picturing what it would have been like if he’d stayed.

As for the other, all she knew was she'd never been so turned-on in her life as she'd been in the hot tub. Her hormones might have been tamed by the nasal spray, but her emotions and fundamental desires had been immune to the chemical harness. She wanted Quinn. It was as simple as that.

"You liked it better when I was so desperate I hardly knew what we were doing?" Did he know about the nasal spray? Erin had warned her that it was forbidden. "Therian heat is like a date rape drug."

He shoved her chair back and stood, gaze narrowing to glistening slits. "Except I didn't give it to you, and I made damn sure you were willing before I ever touched you even once."

"You're right. That wasn't fair." She stood as well, rolling her chair out of the way. Their bodies were already in sync. If she didn't defuse this fast, she'd be facing the longest three months of her life. "I was frightened. I'd never been that out of control before. I didn't want to sleep with you because my hormones left me no choice."

His brow knitted as he considered her words, and then his jaw dropped and he shook his head. "Did she give you a Heat kit?" He raked his hand through his hair, creating adorable spikes. "Of course she did! Why didn't I see this coming?" He snorted. "Or *not* coming." He was seriously pissed, but she wasn't sure if she had garnered his wrath or if he was focused entirely on Erin. "No wonder I lost control. Those chemicals are forbidden for a reason."

"My entire world has been thrown into chaos. I had to regain control over some small aspect of the situation." She crossed her arms, wishing he'd sit down. Having him glare down at her wasn't making her confession any easier. "Besides... I wanted to know I'd chosen my lover, not just accepted the first Therian who crossed my path."

He hooked her belt loop and pulled her toward him, his expression still unreadable. "You have to stop using that kit. I'll give you as much time as I can, but those chemicals throw everything off balance."

“I thought the mist just slowed things down, backed off the urgency.” She’d used the mist that morning and her hunger had simmered ever since. She’d been aware of the slumbering urgency, but the craving had been easily managed. Even in the hot tub she’d felt far more in control than she had in the truck. He rested his hands on her hips, allowing a cushion of space between them.

His gaze lowered to her mouth and his thumbs stroked her sides, the caress light, almost unconscious. Their gazes locked and his hands tensed. “You keep revving me up, but your body isn’t giving me what I need to finish the job. That’s why I started to shift last night. My desire built and built without a chemical response from you.”

“But I responded. I was just as wild as you were.”

He shook his head. “It’s not the same. No matter how many times you climaxed, I wouldn’t have been able to come.”

“Like in the hot tub?”

“Exactly.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” She looked away from his grim face, unable to concentrate with his penetrating stare boring into her. “Erin never said anything about side effects.”

His warm chuckle drew her gaze back to his face. “She probably thought I deserved it. I suspect she wouldn’t have offered you the kit if you’d chosen Ian.”

The casual mention of the other man’s name sent unanswered questions tumbling through her mind. There was never going to be a good time for this subject and he was already annoyed with her. What did she have to lose? She took a deep breath and placed her hand on his chest. “I don’t need details, but will you please let me know why they—”

“Hate me?”

“I was going to say mistrust you.”

He stepped back, away from her touch, then returned to his chair. “Erin might mistrust me, but Ian hates me.”

“Why?” She sat as well, crossing her legs in an attempt to appear at ease. “Did you use your ability on his sister or something?”

“Best friend’s wife,” Quinn supplied without outward emotion.

She’d figured as much, but his motivation was still a mystery. “Was there a reason for your actions, or did you lose control?” There had to be more to the story than Ian knew or was willing to accept. Quinn could be arrogant and domineering, but he was fiercely protective and honorable. There was no way he would intentionally harm a woman.

Quinn’s brow arched in mock surprise. “Someone is going to ask questions before passing judgment? This will be a first.”

She tried not to be affected by his obvious bitterness. Objectivity was key to understanding any situation. “How did it happen?”

“I was hunting a man named Russell.”

“Ian’s best friend?”

“Ian claims they were closer than brothers.” Quinn shrugged. Despite his calm expression, resentment and regret warred within his gaze. “There’s no accounting for taste.”

“What had Russell done? Why were you hunting him?”

“Armed robbery. The worthless bird had a thing against honest work.”

If she was going to give Quinn the benefit of a doubt, Ian deserved it too. “Why would Ian defend someone like that?”

“According to Ian, Russell was an adrenaline junkie who would do all sorts of irrational things for the thrill of it.”

“That’s no excuse.”

The shadow of a smile fell across Quinn’s lips. “I agree. Society is too quick to justify wrong choices with syndromes and behavioral disorders. Three people got shot while Russell chased his adrenaline fix that day. One of them almost died.”

“What about Russell’s wife? Had she done something wrong?” If she wanted the complete truth, she had to be willing to dig for the answers and risk reawakening Quinn’s temper.

“Jillian was aiding and abetting a violent fugitive.” His voice remained conversational, but his features began to tense. “I could have shot her and been within my rights.”

That was obviously Quinn’s perspective. By the letter of the law, Jillian was guilty and his actions were justified. But the woman in Carissa couldn’t help but identify with the choices Jillian had faced. How could any woman stand by and allow the man she loved to be incarcerated? Therian males weren’t the only ones who could feel protective.

“How did triggering Jillian’s heat help you find Russell?” They were moving closer to the heart of the matter, the conflict stemming from the circumstances. She fiddled with the hem of her shirt, not even sure when she’d untucked it.

“I didn’t intend for the result to be as powerful as it was. I just needed to be able to track her to her mate.”

Regret twisted his features for a moment before he retreated behind his expressionless mask. She’d felt an odd ping of emotions, like an echo down a long corridor. Was she starting to sense emotional spikes in his consciousness? Would this happen more often as their bodies adapted to each other?

“I brushed up against her in a bar then went to my truck to wait for her to rendezvous with Russell. She ducked out the back and I never saw her leave. According to Ian, Jillian’s scent was so strong and her need so demanding that Russell walked in on a Roman-style orgy featuring his wife.” He shook his head and stared off into the distance. “Russell ran out of the motel room in a blind rage and I managed to trap him, but none of it unfolded the way I’d planned. Jillian was collateral damage. That was never my intention.”

Carissa hesitated. She still had so many questions, but Quinn stared into nothingness, sullen and defeated. She didn’t want to revisit this hurtful memory once they ended this conversation, so she reluctantly pushed on.

“Was Ian directly involved in some way or did he just know the couple?”

Quinn released a heavy sigh then said, “Ian led the charge to have me banished. He submitted the case in Jillian’s name, but everyone knew he was the driving force behind the charges.”

“Were you close before this happened?”

“Kyle knew him a lot better than I did, but at one time I considered him a friend.”

Which would have made Ian’s betrayal sting all the more. She knew the outcome of the trial, so she didn’t ask for details. “Had anyone ever responded that strongly to your ability before?”

“Yes, but the situation was vastly different.” Quinn’s dark gaze shifted back to her face. Most of the anger had melted from his expression, but the pain was even more upsetting.

She wanted to touch him, smooth the worry lines from his brow and trace along his prickly jaw. But she knew he’d bat her hand away and retreat even farther. “How was the situation different?”

“I was fifteen when it happened the first time. Kyle dared me to ask an older girl to dance. I’d never touched a female before and I became immediately aroused. The more excited I became, the more excited it made her. By the end of the dance, she was ready to do a whole lot more than dance. Kyle was convinced I’d done something to her. I told him he was full of shit, but when I tried it again a few weeks later, the same thing happened.”

“You were only fifteen when this began?” A young male discovering his own sexuality with the power to instantly arouse females. She couldn’t imagine a more volatile situation. “Were you tempted to switch on every girl you encountered?”

“I can’t say the thought never crossed my mind. But as someone so kindly pointed out, switching females on is rather like slipping them a date rape drug. Rape, in any form, is abhorrent to me.”

She cringed at the reminder of her careless charge. She hadn't meant it as an accusation. She just hadn't been thinking when she chose her illustration. "How long did it take you to figure out how to control it?"

"As with any Therian ability, mine grew stronger with age. Luckily, as the female reaction to me became stronger, I found the path within myself and figured out how to open and close it." Quinn related the facts with casual indifference, as if he were no longer talking about himself. She recognized the defense mechanism, having used it herself from time to time.

"You said there was another time when the woman had an unusually strong reaction to your pulse," Carissa prompted, not wanting to hear a detailed list of his conquests.

He'd crossed his legs, resting his ankle on his knee. He looked restless and edgy, apparently as uncomfortable with the topic as she was. "I dated a woman about four years ago who was into designer drugs. If she was high when we had sex, she was wild for days."

"You think Jillian was high when your pulse hit her?" She really didn't want to hear about his sexual exploits.

"My best guess is ecstasy. It stimulates the pleasure center of the brain and releases a person's inhibitions. It's the perfect boost for my ability." He fiddled with the buckle on his boot, voice tense and resigned.

Carissa touched his knee, drawing his attention back to her. "What happened to Jillian, you know, after all that?"

"There was no after," he snapped, rolling away from her again. "Russell was locked up by the time she came down and he refused to see her. The story of her behavior spread like wildfire and her network treated her like a whore. By the time Russell calmed down enough to start asking questions, it was too late."

The gravity in his tone led to only one conclusion. The question hung on the tip of her tongue, a final barrier between her and the truth.

“She...killed herself?” Quinn nodded and her heart constricted, momentarily stealing her breath. She felt horrible for the couple who had been destroyed by the situation. Jillian’s life had ended much too soon. But Quinn must be riddled with guilt. Regardless of his intentions, his actions had led to an innocent woman’s death. “So Ian swore to kill you if you ever switched on another female.”

“As if I needed to be told.” Quinn grated out the words between clenched teeth as he slowly pushed to his feet. “Her face haunts me every fucking day. She was mated, for God’s sake. I thought she would run straight to her husband and he would take care of her needs. They would have one last night together before Russell answered for his crimes. I had no idea... There was no need for Ian’s crusade. No power on earth could make me do it again.”

She took a step toward him, but he strode to the ladder and scrambled down to the main floor. “I’m sorry,” she said to the empty loft, hoping he’d hear her. She’d honestly thought it would be good for them to share a bit more of themselves. She needed to reconcile her impression of Quinn with the way he was treated by others.

Suddenly a stray fact reached the surface of her memory. Erin had said Quinn had been banished by the network. They’d made him a social pariah, adding insult to injury. He’d been doing his job. He had no way of knowing that Jillian would react so powerfully to the pulse.

She moved closer to the railing, so she could see the living room below. He sat on the sofa, booted feet propped on the scuffed coffee table. “Are there Therian prisons? How are shapeshifters incarcerated?”

A smile lifted the corners of his mouth as he glanced up at her. “Are you sure you’re not a reporter?”

“I can’t help it.” She folded her arms on the peeled-log railing and smiled. “I’m part cat.”

He slowly shook his head and folded his arms over his chest, accenting the bulk of his muscular arms. “There’s a Therian prison in the Yukon wilderness, but Therians are more interested in justice for vic-

tims than the rehabilitation of criminals so we have far fewer prisoners than humans.”

Now there was a concept that deserved further discussion, but she'd obviously annoyed him enough for one night.

A knock drew his attention to the front door. “It’s probably Landon, but stay there.”

Stay there. She was starting to hate the phrase. It rolled off the tongues of Therian males with frustrating regularity. Their instinctual need to protect her only shined a glaring light on her inability to protect herself. She needed to learn how to fight, or they needed to teach her how to access her latent abilities so she wouldn't be so helpless.

Quinn opened the door and muttered a greeting to the blond man standing on the porch. The newcomer wasn't as tall as Quinn, but he managed to emanate the subtle menace Carissa had sensed in other Therian males. His hair was a unique blending of silver, gold and bronze. Humans would think he'd spent a fortune having highlights and lowlights threaded through his wavy hair, but she suspected the combination was entirely natural. His body was compact and lean, his features striking rather than classically handsome.

“My men are in place. Is there something specific we should be looking for?”

So this was Landon. Why was a wolf-shifter helping a powerful cat clan? Weren't the wolves supposed to be in league with Osric?

“The shooter took off in a dark-blue truck, but it's unlikely they'll send the same man.” Quinn dug the transceivers out of his pocket and handed them to Landon. “I'll give you ten minutes to pass these out then activate the grid.”

As they shifted position to make the exchange, Landon spotted Carissa and paused. With his pale-blue gaze focused on her and light shining in his unusual hair, Carissa felt even more vulnerable than she had when she met tiger-biker Jake.

Landon inclined his head in silent greeting and Carissa did the same.

“Jake’s crew will be back in the morning,” Landon told Quinn and left without another word.

Quinn shut and locked the door, pausing with his back against the solid wood panel. “Now where were we?” He stared up at her, his gaze dark and brooding.

“I’m sorry about the inquisition. I didn’t realize the event would still be so painful.”

“You’re full of shit, sweetheart.” He pushed off the door and moved toward her. Each step was slow and measured, as if he stalked a lesser being, deciding how best to devour his prey. “Only something painful could create that sort of hostility. You knew exactly what you were doing.”

He was right. She’d had a pretty good idea where the story led, just hadn’t imagined the end would be quite so harrowing. “Do you want to know something about me? I’m willing to give as good as I get.”

With inhuman strength he leapt from the floor of the cabin to the loft. She scrambled back with a startled gasp, hand pressed over her heart.

“Why don’t you get naked, so I can put that claim to the test?”



Chapter Seven



Carly straightened her jacket and smoothed her skirt as dread twisted through her abdomen. “Have I done something wrong?”

“I have no idea.” The amusement in Osric’s dark eyes only added to her anxiety. “I was told to fetch you, and that’s what I’ve done. You will refer to the men as sir, and the woman as ma’am. You are not allowed to ask questions.”

They stood in the corridor outside the conference room, the only office in the complex from which global communications were possible. Every other office had limited access and the available access was monitored. “They’re our employers, not psychotic dictators.”

His eyebrow arched in silent challenge as he reached for the door handle. He swung the door open and motioned her inside. “Have a seat.” Osric waited until she obeyed, and then he closed the door, leaving her alone in the room.

The oval table could seat ten comfortably. She wasn’t even sure how many “backers” there were. Unsure what was expected of her, she chose a chair near the middle of the table and sat. She’d made presentations in this room and had attended other people’s presentations, but she’d never been summoned by the backers before.

Had they learned of her sexual escapades with Officer Samuels? The young man had been embarrassed by how quickly he came the first time, so he’d made sure she found release twice before he came the second time. Surely she wouldn’t be dismissed for one night’s indiscretion.

The massive screen at the far end of the room illuminated then divided into six rectangular panels. So this was to be a video-interroga-

tion. Carly sat up straight and folded her hands on the tabletop. The top three panels activated as the backers arrived. With glossy black hair and almond-shaped eyes, the woman in the middle appeared to be of Asian descent. The man on her right had very short gray hair and light-blue eyes. He might not be in uniform, but Carissa could spot the watchful bearing of a career military man anywhere. The man on the left was harder to define. His longish brown hair was a sharp contrast to his piercing dark stare. With swarthy skin and a diamond stud winking from his earlobe, he reminded her of a pirate. A pirate, a general and Madam Butterfly? An interesting mix.

“You are Dr. Ides?” Madam Butterfly asked.

“I am.”

“How are you coping with compound life? Our expectations are not easy.”

Concern was the last thing she'd expected. And somehow she didn't believe a word of it. “I understand the need for discretion. The possible ramifications of what we've discovered are unbelievable. Without careful control...it will be pandemonium.”

“We agree.” The pirate spoke English with a European accent, Spanish or Italian, Carly wasn't sure. “You seem to grasp the gravity of this situation better than your coworkers. We are impressed by your accomplishments as well as your attitude.”

She nodded. Osric had told her not to ask questions, but she was about to ignore his advice. “What would you like me to do?”

The general came right to the point. “We don't trust Osric. When push comes to shove, he's one of them.”

“He claims he is reestablishing his rightful place within the power structure of the Therian nation, but we have our doubts,” Madam Butterfly told her. “If he were truly reclaiming his rightful place, he wouldn't need our assistance.”

“You’re using him while he believes he’s using you?” Anticipation tingled through Carly. Dangerous situations had always turned her on, and her work environment was about to become a lot more exciting.

“Look at her eyes.” The pirate chuckled. “We’ve chosen well, my friends.”

“Dr. Ides, we need you to get close to Osric.” Madam Butterfly moved closer to the camera, her expression intense and assessing. “Find out everything he’s not telling us. Things he would only confess to a lover. We will make it worth your while in ways you can only imagine.”

Carly tensed. Osric had made his interest in her obvious from the beginning. Getting close to him would be no problem. Suppressing her revulsion while he had his way with her would be the hardest struggle of her life.

“Can you do it?” the general asked. “You don’t look pleased by the idea.”

“What I want to do and what I’m willing to do are two very different things. Osric has been sniffing after me for weeks. All I have to do to gain his attention is stop pushing him away.”

“Very good.” The general nodded, obviously pleased with the outcome. “I have another meeting, but Roberto will set you up with an access code so you can get in touch with us.”

“Welcome aboard,” Madam Butterfly said, and then she and the general blinked off, leaving Carly with the pirate, whose name, apparently, was Roberto.



QUINN ADVANCED ON CARISSA, not stopping until her back pressed against the wall of the loft. Their trip down memory lane had left him irritable and restless. She’d ruthlessly stripped him bare and now he intended to return the favor.

“This isn’t what I meant.” Her tone was breathless and shaky, but her eyes dilated and color deepened across her cheeks, making her claim hard to believe.

“Maybe not, but it’s what we need.”

“What about the security grid?” She gestured toward the desk.

“Let me worry about that.”

She glanced into his eyes then looked away, adorably flustered. “We can’t do this. You know we can’t.”

He slipped his hand into the back of her hair and formed a careful fist. His cat paced, anxious and eager. He accepted the urgency without absorbing the possessive demand. “When did you last use the Heat kit?”

She started to reply when his phone vibrated, emitting a low, moaning sound. He released her hair with a muttered curse and pulled the phone from his pocket. Landon’s text said his men were in position, so Quinn crossed to the desk and activated the security grid. Then he pushed both chairs in, freeing up the floor, and turned around. “No more interruptions.” She stood where he’d left her, near the wall, flushed and fidgety. “Come here.” He held out his hand.

She shook her head. “I won’t let you define me.”

He crossed the room and caged her with his arms, not trusting himself to touch her. “If I’d wanted to define you by force, I wouldn’t have stopped last night.” Pressing his face against her hair, he drew in her scent, allowing the warmth to soothe him. The faintest trace of fear tainted her evocative musk and he tensed. “I will never hurt you. Do you believe that?” He eased back and looked into her eyes.

“Not intentionally.” She stared up at him, gaze wide and earnest rather than challenging. “I know you want to protect me, but there’s so much in life we don’t control.”

Curving his fingers around the back of her neck, he traced the underside of her jaw with his thumb while he searched her eyes. He felt a whole hell of a lot more for her than protectiveness, but she didn’t

understand the significance of their connection. Never before had his body locked in sync with a female. He'd given up hope of ever finding a potential mate, and then all of the sudden the impossible had happened. He'd found a female capable of trusting him, a female compatible with his unique physiology. Which didn't mean she'd accept him. It just meant they were compatible when and if he managed to convince her he was a worthy mate.

"Answer my question. When did you last use the Heat kit?" He angled his thumb up and brushed her lower lip.

"This morning."

He moved closer, his legs touching hers. "Mist or cream?"

"Mist."

After tilting her head back, he bent and pressed his mouth over hers. It wasn't really a kiss, just a momentary contact to reacquaint his lips with the softness of hers. "Are your senses still muted or has the mist worn off?" His lips moved against hers as he spoke, his breath warming her skin.

"I'm not sure." She shifted restlessly, her legs intertwining with his. "I'm not as crazy as I was in the truck, but I..."

"You what?" He ignored the urge to grab her hair, to crush her against his chest and kiss her into submission. Each time he gave in to his aggressive needs, he brought his cat closer to the surface.

"I want you."

Her whispered admission sent desire spiraling through him, igniting his senses and stoking fires already ablaze. He took her face between his hands and claimed her mouth in a passionate kiss. Pressing her firmly against the wall with the entire length of his body, he forced his cat back through sheer strength of will.

His tongue teased her lips, waiting for her to open before venturing beyond the silken portal. Her mouth was warm and her tongue greeted his with a playful curl. Their breaths mingled and their lips meshed as

he took the kiss deeper. She tilted her head, bringing their mouths into better alignment as their tongues slid from one mouth to the other.

She was so damn sweet, he wanted to devour her, to touch her and taste her until she was as wild for him as he was for her.

Untucking his t-shirt, she slipped her hands inside the clingy material and groaned as she encountered his heated skin. In response, he tore her knit shirt off over her head and unfastened her bra. She hesitated for a moment then slipped the undergarment off and tossed it aside.

He sank to his knees and pressed his face against her breasts, wrapping his arm around her thighs. "You're perfect." An abrupt chuckle vibrated her soft flesh and made him look up.

"You're lust crazed. Any willing female will seem perfect to you right now." Despite her dismissive tone, she didn't quite conceal the insecurity in her gaze.

With more assertiveness than he'd intended to unleash, he pulled her away from the wall and lowered her to the carpeted floor. She gasped and extended her arms protectively, but he was beyond caution, beyond human compromise. No Therian male allowed his mate to be maligned, regardless of the source.

He parted her legs and knelt between her thighs then arched over her and pinned her hands above her head. Her breasts quivered with each breath, the nipples rosy points. He bent to one and sucked, scraping the hard little peak against his teeth as he let go.

Shifting both wrists into one hand, he freed the other so he could touch her. "Your skin is incredibly soft and I love the way your body responds to me." He caressed the underside of her breast then worked the tip into an even tighter peak.

Each gasp and groan fueled his determination to erode her emotional defenses. She needed to understand that this was about more than physical pleasure. No Therian approached sex with the casual indifference so prevalent among humans.

She turned her face to the side and closed her eyes.

Was she concentrating on the sensations or tuning him out? Possessiveness spread through him like a cancer, devouring the softer emotions, demanding attention as it spiked his lust. “Who’s touching you?”

“You are.” Her lashes fluttered then she opened her eyes, their blue depths unfocused and murky.

“Say my name.”

“Quinn.” They gazed into each other’s eyes for a long, tense moment. Then she arched her back, pushing her breasts toward him. “Please, more.”

Thrilled by her offer, he let go of her wrists and pulled her body up toward his waiting mouth. He teased and sucked, licked and nibbled, addicted to the feel of her beaded flesh sliding against his tongue. She buried her fingers in his hair and pushed herself deeper into his mouth, her cries of pleasure urging him on.

He kissed his way down her abdomen, circling her navel as he frantically unfastened her jeans. Rocking back onto his knees, he searched her gaze as he pulled off her shoes and socks. As their link solidified, they’d be able to sense each other’s thoughts and emotions. But for now he had to depend on her expressions and physical responses.

She’d returned her arms to the floor, hands clasped above her head. Was she pretending she was bound? Whether she was willing to admit it or not, surrendering control excited his little hellion. His gut clenched and his cock bucked against the confines of his jeans. His jaguar roared, more than ready to explore her submissive nature.

Quinn closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, letting her scent soothe him. He had to slow down. If he frightened her now, she’d never trust him again. He skimmed his fingers along her sides and across her tense belly, watching her squirm beneath his teasing touch.

When he finally unbuttoned the top of her jeans, she lifted her hips so he could peel them down and then tug them off. All that remained were her flower-printed panties. The garment was designed for comfort, not seduction, but somehow she made cotton look sexy.

He traced the waistband with his index finger, watching carefully for her response. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth and her abdomen tensed as his fingertip skated over her soft skin. Then he ran both hands down the back side of her thighs and slipped his fingers inside her panties, cupping her ass cheeks.

She gasped and wiggled and he smiled. "Another perfect fit." He squeezed as he lifted her hips, bringing her sex closer to his face, his mouth. "Your scent makes me dizzy. And *hungry*."

"You're killing me," she whispered, arching up until her panties brushed his lips.

He breathed over the damp material, savoring the unmistakable scent of her arousal. As long as the mist had worn off, her cream would ease his hunger and give him enough control to make the rest good for her. Besides, he wanted to feel her undulate against his mouth and hear her cries of pleasure echo off the walls of his cabin.

Lowering her back to the floor, he eased his hands out from under her and grasped the sides of her panties. She raised her hips as he gently dragged the underwear down and tossed it aside. Her blush deepened with each article he removed until she lay before him wearing only a bright red flush.

Starting with her lovely face, he admired each individual asset, her smooth brow and small nose, sculpted cheeks and lush, kissable lips. The elegant length of her neck led him to her slender shoulders and those pert, perfect breasts. He paused for a gentle squeeze, unable to move on without feeling the soft resilience within the cup of his hand.

"You. Are. Perfect." He leaned down and silenced her reply with his kiss. "And not just because I'm lust crazed. I thought you were perfect when I first saw you."

Doubt still clouded her gaze, but she didn't argue. He reached for her leg, but she grabbed his wrist. "Not a chance. You get naked or this ends now."

He wasn't sure the mist was completely out of her system, but his clothes weren't going to make that obstacle any easier to hurdle. "I guess that's only fair."

Hating to move away from her, even temporarily, he rocked back onto his ass and pulled off his boots. She propped herself up on her elbows and watched, an appreciative smile curving her kiss-swollen lips. Her gaze followed his hands, caressing each new inch of flesh he exposed. The physical demands of his life had shaped his body into something females enjoyed. And he'd never been so glad for his muscular physique. She sat then knelt as desire flared within her eyes.

He returned to her, kneeling as she knelt, his cock arching toward her, nearly spanning the distance between their bodies. "Touch me, helion. I need your hands on me."

Carissa's hand trembled as she reached out and touched Quinn's chest. As always, his skin was incredibly hot yet soft beneath her fingers. The muscles beneath his skin were hard as stone, but the skin itself was smooth and inviting. She grew bolder, using both hands as she stroked over his shoulders and down his arms.

He didn't rush her, but his hips jerked each time she ventured near his erection or down the front of his thigh. She leaned in so she could grip his ass and his sex brushed against her belly. They gasped in unison and she looked into his eyes.

Without breaking eye contact, he guided one of her hands to his cock and curved her fingers around the shaft. She moved her other hand between his thighs, cupping his balls as she began to stroke him. "Should we make sure the mist is out of my system before we... I don't want to get really into this and find out you can't finish."

He dragged her hands away from his sex then wrapped his arms around her. "I have a better idea." He swept her up in his arms and placed her on her back. "Ladies first." He grinned as he moved between her legs then stretched out on his stomach.

“How will this help us determine if I’m still under the influence of the mist?” She wasn’t objecting to his plan. She just thought his ability to climax was the problem, not hers.

“If it takes you longer than two minutes to come, I’ll know we’re in trouble.”

She slapped at him playfully. “That’s incredibly arrogant! Maybe I just don’t like you.”

Bending her knees, he pushed her legs wide. “Let’s find out.”

He kissed his way down her inner thigh. Carissa tried not to tense, tried to enjoy the simple brush of his lips against her sensitive skin. He paused with his face directly over her sex and inhaled deeply. Then he kissed his way up the other side. It was a cruel sort of pleasure. Her skin tingled and her core tightened, primed and ready to ignite.

His breath caressed her first, warm and moist against her cleft. She trembled, tormented by anticipation, needing his kiss, the knowing sweep of his tongue. “Please.” She turned her head to the side, hating how easily he made her desperate.

“Say my name.” His whispered demand sent another current of moist breath curling across her folds.

“Quinn. Stop teasing me.”

He gently parted her with his fingers and she could hear the grin in his voice as he said, “I like teasing you.” His tongue stroked from back to front, slowly blazing a path from her needful core to her ultrasensitive nub. He circled her clit, dragging his tongue across the bundle of nerves before flicking his tongue against it.

She gasped and jerked as sensations radiated through her abdomen. Already tension built within her, rippling along her inner walls. “We’re clear.” She gasped. “The mist is...gone.”

His lips closed around her clit, tugging with slow yet firm pulls. Her hips came off the floor and his lips let go. The pleasure burst within her and Carissa cried out. She shook, both hands grasping his head as the orgasm tore through her.

He pushed two fingers into her tense passage, drawing out her pleasure as she shuddered and moaned. "That's right. Don't hold back."

Then he slowly slid his fingers out and draped her legs over his shoulders. Too dazed to question his intentions, she relaxed into the new position and waited for the next wave of sensation. His mouth moved against her, tongue delving deeper. He made soft, appreciative murmurs as he lapped up the proof of her pleasure. It was as if he not only enjoyed her taste but...*needed* it.

The thought made her tremble. He wasn't just giving her pleasure. He was sustaining himself with her essence. It was so primal, almost vampiric in its savagery, and she had never found anything so arousing. Tingles spread across her skin and heat melted through her body, providing him with more of what he needed. He growled, the sound decidedly feline, and his tongue thrust deep into her body. She canted her hips, offering him a better angle for his feast.

Sensations swirled through her and flowed out of her. Another orgasm formed deep inside her, throbbing with its own distinct rhythm. His hands tightened on her hips and his mouth became more demanding, his lips sucking, drawing her cream directly into his mouth.

She tossed her head and fought back a scream as pleasure erupted inside her. The wave crashed over her, flowed into him, then returned like a tingling tide. Lights danced before her eyes and she seemed to float above the floor.

He rose to his knees and her legs slid to the bend of his elbows. Then his cock pressed against her entrance and his gaze locked with hers. He advanced slowly, filling her inch by tantalizing inch.

Her body stretched around him, wet and willing yet snug from disuse. When he was buried to the hilt, he moved his hands to the floor, freeing her legs as he arched over her body.

His mouth came down and covered hers, lips warm and soft, tongue bold and playful. The taste of her passion was inescapable, but

she found it thrilling, a not very subtle reminder of how well he had pleased her.

She waited for him to move, anticipation heightening her arousal. He kissed her and kissed her, his groin flush with hers. With their bodies joined, she could feel the link connecting their minds growing stronger. A trickle of energy flowed into her mind, bringing his desire for her with it, revealing the control it took for him to go slow.

Tightening her inner muscles, she squeezed him as hard as she could. He wasn't the only one craving motion. He groaned against her open mouth and pulled back his hips. His length slid outward as slowly as it had glided in. As usual, his patience was driving her crazy.

Rocking back onto his knees, he tilted her pelvis toward him and found a steady rhythm. His tempo was slow but smooth, filling her deeply with each rotation.

She'd known it would be sweet, but there was a depth to their joining that she'd never experienced before. Their psychic link vibrated and more emotions flowed into her mind—lust, determination and a liberal dose of tenderness. The stronger emotions were clearly written on his tense features, but she hadn't expected the tenderness.

His fingers dug into her hips and he moved faster. She bent her knees but kept her legs open, not wanting to hinder his range of motion. He took advantage of her position and drove deep, a fresh rush of desire accompanying each thrust.

His lips pulled back from his teeth and she tensed. His canines had formed distinct peaks, elongating into fangs. His pace sped, and then sped again, spine arched, head thrown back. An animalistic growl emanated from his throat and she trembled with a heady mixture of pleasure and uncertainty.

As long as she didn't swallow his blood, her Therian nature would remain undefined. If he lost control, it was up to her to keep this from ending badly.

Blinding hunger poured across their link, saturating her mind. Rational thought was consumed by the fire, but protective instincts guided her next move. She grabbed his hair and jerked his head to the side while twisting her shoulder out of range of his mouth.

With one final thrust, he came deep inside her, the rhythmic spurt of his hot seed triggering her orgasm. She let go of his hair and clung to him as sensations swept through her body.

Threaded through her pleasure, she felt emotions that were clearly not hers. Fierce protectiveness, elemental longing and...hope. When Quinn looked at her, he felt hope for the first time in many years.

“Damn,” he whispered. “That was close.”

She looked up in time to see a flash of gold gleaming in his eyes. “Don’t I have to swallow your blood for it to trigger my definition?”

“Yes.” He rocked back onto his knees, taking his weight off her without separating their bodies.

“Then it wouldn’t have mattered if you had bitten me, as long as I kept my mouth closed.”

He looked startled by her attitude. “It would have mattered to me. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You would never hurt me. I know that now.” She reached up and ran the backs of her fingers across his cheek.

“If you were so sure of me,” he leaned down and kissed the tip of her nose, “then why did you yank on my hair?”

“Instinct took over, I admit. But at the very end, I felt what you feel for me.”

Before he could respond to her admission, the most annoying sound doused their simmering desire.

“Shit!” Quinn disentangled their bodies and rushed to the computer desk, he was still mostly erect, as if he were ready to go again. “At least they waited until we finished.” He winked at her and added, “Round one.”

“What’s wrong?” She sat up, too shaky yet to stand.

“Something tripped a proximity sensor.” He snatched his jeans off the floor and dug out his phone. “Landon, what—” Landon’s curt response cut off the rest of Quinn’s question. He ended the call, tossed Carissa the phone then jumped down from the loft. “Lock the door behind me and do not leave the cabin for any reason!”

He didn’t bother dressing, so she followed suit, though she used the ladder on her way down. A familiar feline cry split the night moments after she bolted the door. She intended to stay inside as he’d directed, but she needed to get dressed and find a weapon. She had no idea what, or who, had tripped the alarm, or how serious the danger was, but she was not going to be standing here naked if the fight made it back to the cabin.



RELEASING HIS HUMAN form in a violent surge of Therian power, Quinn leapt from the porch and arched through the darkness. He channeled energy through his body, commanding his bones to reshape, muscles to re-form and cells to reorder. One moment of blinding pain drove reality from his mind. Then the shift passed along his body in a controlled cascade.

His strangled cry of agony erupted in a feline roar and his sturdy front legs absorbed the impact as he landed on the hard-packed ground. He shook off the momentary jumble, scrambling for understanding within his new perspective.

Quinn still existed within the jaguar, but the cat was in control. Instinct rather than logic guided his actions. Raising his head, he sniffed the air, assessing the danger and locating the threat. Cool, pine-scented air hung heavy with the promise of rain and—

Wolves! Their scent was unmistakable.

He bounded through the trees, following their scent, fueled by fury and possessiveness. This was his territory. His mate was nearby, which meant his mate was in danger.

Twigs snapped beneath his paws as he ran up a slope and skirted a rock formation. Growls and yelps reached his ears, drawing him in a slightly different direction. A shot echoed through the trees, an angry voice, and then another shot.

Quinn sped his pace, heart hammering in his chest. He saw figures up ahead and heard the voice more clearly.

“The next shot goes through your stubborn head,” Landon shouted. “Is that really how you want this to end?”

Pausing at the edge of the scene, Quinn quickly assessed the situation. Two naked men knelt on the ground with their hands clasped behind their heads. Their chests heaved and they glared at the three wolf-shifters circling and snapping at them. Apparently, Landon’s men had motivated the intruders to revert to their human form.

Landon, who hadn’t bothered to shift, had a pistol trained on the final intruder. Still in wolf form, the final intruder snarled and paced, his compact body low to the ground, ready to attack.

“Back down,” Landon ordered. “There doesn’t need to be blood between us.”

“You’re the one on the wrong side of the fight,” one of the other intruders muttered.

Landon tensed but didn’t let his focus drift from the stubborn wolf.

The wolf lifted its head and bared its teeth, looking as if it would leap for Landon’s throat.

Quinn started forward, but with a feral growl, the wolf darted to the side and ran into the darkness. Coward. The thought was still echoing through Quinn’s mind when he realized the direction of the wolf’s “retreat”. He was headed straight for the cabin!

Pivoting sharply to the side, Quinn ran as fast as his feline legs would carry him. He crashed through underbrush and leapt over boulders, fear driving him faster than he’d ever gone before. Carissa was safe inside the cabin. As long as her curiosity didn’t compromise the situation, she’d be okay.

Light spilled out of the front window, silhouetting her body as she stood in plain sight, holding back one side of the curtains. He hadn't told her to stay away from the windows, just to stay inside the cabin. His jaguar roared in frustration, shoving Quinn's thoughts deeper into the background as he focused on his prey.

The wolf zigzagged through the trees, approaching from a different angle. Quinn spotted him slinking toward the porch from the opposite side of the front yard. The wolf used the yard's natural slope to help him build up speed as he ran toward the front of the house.

Quinn leapt onto the porch, ready to block the wolf's path, but the fool veered at the last minute and launched himself at the window. Carissa screamed and scrambled back, the curtain swinging back into place, muting the light.

The glow of Therian energy illuminated the wolf's predicament. He'd thrown all his strength into the daring move, triggering a shift as he sailed through the air. His shoulder hit the bulletproof pane and his momentum rebounded. He twisted, miraculously landing on his hands and knees rather than his side.

Quinn pounced, knocking him over onto his back and pinning him to the porch with his massive paws. The wolf-shifter shrieked, blocking his face with his forearms. Quinn's consciousness surged through his jaguar's bloodlust. The wolf was young, hardly more than a boy. Quinn bared his teeth and growled. The wolf-shifter trembled beneath him, obviously terrified.

"Jenaro! As much as I hate to admit it, Dhane's my brother." Swinging his head to the side, Quinn looked at Landon. He stood on the ground on the other side of the porch rail, his pistol still in hand. "I'd rather not have his blood on my hands."

After pausing for another warning snarl, Quinn moved off the boy and released his shift. Energy shot up his spine and spread over his body, facilitating the transformation. It only took a moment for his

body to reshape, but for that moment he was vulnerable. If Landon hadn't been standing there, he never would have taken the chance.

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled and he glanced toward the window. Carissa peeked out, holding back the curtain only far enough to provide a discreet opening.

Dhane struggled to his feet, bruised and winded. "What's that window made of?" He rubbed his shoulder as he backed away.

"Don't make me chase you." Landon's voice snapped with authority and annoyance. He tucked the pistol into the back of his pants, but his gaze gleamed with golden light. "I'm not in the mood for games."

Dhane squared his shoulders and indignation hardened his features. "No, you're in the mood to betray your pack. Father told me you'd joined the rebels, but I refused to believe him."

Landon jumped onto the porch, clearing the rail with an effortless burst of strength. "Father and I have butted heads longer than you've been alive." Though Landon's tone was steely, Quinn recognized the familiar catch of regret. "I've bowed to his dictates out of respect and tradition. But this is too important."

"You're a traitor, and you're not my brother!" Dhane turned and ran for the far side of the porch. Ignoring the stairs, he jumped off the edge and shifted back into his wolf form.

"Damn, he's fast." Quinn watched the boy disappear into the night.

Carissa pushed the curtain aside, her eyes wide with uncertainty. "Aren't you going after him?" Her voice was muffled by the window.

"It's safe to come out now." Quinn motioned her toward the door. "And bring my pants, please."

Landon chuckled, but his gaze kept drifting back toward the trees where his brother had departed.

The front door opened and Carissa stepped out onto the porch. She tossed Quinn his pants and he pulled them on before the conversation resumed.

“That must happen to you a lot,” she mused, her gaze drifting over his bare chest.

“Modesty is a human hang-up,” Landon told her. “Many Therians only bother with clothes when humans are around.”

Her brow arched at the claim, but she only asked, “Why did you let the boy go?”

Landon shrugged. The golden light had receded, returning his eyes to their natural blue. “He can’t tell our father anything he doesn’t already know.”

When Carissa’s only reply was a distracted nod, Quinn looked at Landon and said, “I’m going to take Carissa out to the sanctuary. Your father has obviously lost interest in waiting around for Osric.”

“Or Osric found Ava, so my father is free to pursue his own agenda.”

Quinn looked at Carissa. Her face had drained of color and she’d crossed her arms over her chest. He didn’t think Landon had meant to upset her, but that was obviously the result. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and drew her against his side. “If anyone finds Ava, Kyle will call me. He knows how worried you are about your sister.”

“Sorry,” Landon muttered. “I was just thinking out loud.”

She acknowledged the apology with a subtle nod, yet her body remained tense and distrusting against his side. “If your pack is backing Osric, why are you working for Kyle?”

Despite her sharp tone and the betrayal inferred by the question, Landon didn’t flinch. “I work for Erin, not Kyle. Kyle might have the title, but his mother wields the real power.” He didn’t give Carissa time to respond. Turning back to Quinn, Landon said, “If you’re headed for the sanctuary, I’ll release my men.”

“Thanks for coming. I know it hasn’t made things easier for you.”

He shrugged, his gaze shifting back to Carissa. “My decision was made long before tonight. The Omni Prime must be restored regardless of the cost.”



CLOSING HIS EYES WITH a frustrated sigh, Gage eased his face away from the rifle’s scope and switched on the safety. Another lost opportunity. Damn it. Would the jaguar demon keep Carissa here at his cabin, knowing his enemy had been driven away? Or would he feel violated by the wolves’ infringement into his domain and head to a new location?

And more importantly, why had wolves been guarding the perimeter? Watching wolves fight other wolves in defense of a feline-shifter had seemed extremely odd.

Gage’s phone vibrated, drawing his attention away from the possibilities. He pulled the device from his pocket and looked at the display. “Shit,” he muttered under his breath. Tossing a tarp over his rifle, he climbed into the cab of his truck before he accepted the call.

“Bet you’ll never guess where I am.” Though he’d never actually met Nehema, her soft, faintly raspy voice had become familiar over the last few months. Not good, considering she only called when he’d screwed up.

“I have no idea, ma’am.” He tried not to sound defensive even as his muscles tensed. “Is there some reason why I should?” Team Leader was his direct supervisor, but Nehema made all the important decisions.

“I’m in front of your apartment building.”

His mouth dried out as he tried to swallow. He’d often imagined their first meeting, tried to assign features to the sound of her voice. His imagination failed him now, so he awkwardly cleared his throat. “If I’d known you were coming—”

“I’d have baked a cake?” she jeered. “I was under the impression that my operatives reported to me, not the other way around.”

He bit back the apology that sprung too easily to his lips. If these fools would listen to him instead of mocking him, their objective would have been reached by now.

“Where are you?” she asked after a long pause.

“I’m on a stakeout.”

Her exasperated harrumph filled his ear. “I guessed as much, asshole. State your present location.”

“I’m at the jaguar’s cabin.”

“Did you not understand Team Leader’s directive?” He could picture her lips thinning and her eyes narrowing. That’s how pissed-off people always looked. “He told you to go home.”

“He told me to get some sleep and I did.”

A sharp laugh burst from the phone. “Is that how you’re going to play this? A simple apology would have served you better.”

Apology? He had nothing to apologize for! The memory of Carissa’s body jerking backward as his bullet drilled into her upper chest proved otherwise. But that’s why he was out here. He wanted to atone for his sin. He had to save Willona’s daughter and hopefully prove himself to his supervisors in the process.

“My target is nearly recovered and something strange just took place.” He spoke in a calm, clear voice.

“Explain.”

“A small pack of wolves made a charge for the cabin, but they were driven off by other wolves.”

“The jaguar hired wolf guards?” She sounded doubtful.

“I have no idea why they acted in his defense, but they attacked their own to protect the jaguar and my target.”

Another pause followed. Was she contemplating the possibilities or deciding whether or not he was full of shit? “Are they still at the cabin?”

“At the moment, but I suspect they won’t stay.”

“Consider our conversation postponed. Follow them discreetly and report back any new developments.”

Relief tingled down his spine and he smiled. Despite Team Leader’s best efforts, Gage was officially reinstated.



Chapter Eight



Carly loitered in the observation room, waiting for Osric's inevitable appearance. He'd returned to the compound twenty minutes ago, and he always checked on the test subjects before he sought out the solitude of his quarters. She couldn't imagine why he stayed within the suffocating walls of the compound at all. Unlike her, and the rest of the staff, he was free to come and go as he pleased.

With a bored sigh, she turned her attention to the surveillance monitors. The main monitor allowed onscreen manipulation of the image while six smaller monitors offered thumbprints of the available camera angles. At the moment, each of the six holding cells occupied the small monitors and Devon's cell was displayed on the main monitor. Devon's cell spent a lot of time on the main monitor. Her conditioning had progressed farther than the other test subjects, but Carly suspected Osric also had a personal interest in the young feline shifter.

The other test subjects were asleep on their bunks while Devon sat, staring blindly into the darkness. She'd drawn her legs up to her chest, wrapped her arms around them and rested her chin on her knees. The position made her look vulnerable—and defeated.

An unwanted pang of guilt compressed Carly's heart. She'd done this to Devon. Each successful test, each new level of conditioning, eroded the young woman's spirit. No. Devon wasn't a woman. She was a genetically advanced animal. She might look like a person, but she was ruled by instincts rather than logic.

Carly had witnessed a display of Devon's savagery not two hours before. When she emerged from the drug-induced sexual frenzy, the

tempestuous creature had thrown a fit unlike anything Carly had ever seen. Devon had smashed everything in her cell that wasn't attached and screamed obscenities in three languages. The guards had finally darted her when she made no effort to calm down. Apparently the sedative was already wearing off, but Carly had no idea how long Devon's quiet would last.

The door slid open and Osric came up short in the doorway. "What are you doing in here?"

She'd anticipated the question. She generally stuck to a regimented routine and this was a deviation from the norm. "Devon had a violent outburst earlier. I was just checking to make sure she was still calm."

He moved into the room and closed the door behind him. "What caused her outburst?"

"Without the treatment clouding her thinking, she wasn't happy about yesterday."

"Letting the guards at her was your idea, not mine!"

Damn, he was defensive. "I wasn't blaming you." She took a deep breath and emotionally braced for what she was about to do. "What's the matter?" She swiveled her chair to face him and crossed her legs. Her narrow skirt crept up to mid-thigh. "You seem unusually tense."

"There have been complications with my plans to capture the twins." His gaze traveled up her legs and lingered on her breasts before finally connecting with her eyes. "I've depended too heavily on others and I've been disappointed. As usual." He paused for an unconvincing shrug then asked, "What did the backers want? You've never been summoned before."

She'd anticipated this question too. "They weren't pleased with some of my recent decisions. They disapproved of my allowing the guards access to Devon and were even more disappointed that I...entertained myself with Samuels. They reaffirmed my objectives, in no uncertain terms, and reminded me that staff is not to interact with the test subjects for any reason. And fraternizing is strictly forbidden."

His lips bowed just a little and his shoulders relaxed. “Doesn’t sound like Devon appreciated your thoughtfulness anyway. Were you punished?” Excitement rippled through the question and his gaze zeroed in on her mouth.

“They warned that any deviation from established protocol would result in my immediate termination.”

“I see,” he grumbled.

“You sound disappointed.” She pushed to her feet and moved closer. “What were you hoping they’d do?”

“Let you feel what it’s like to be a spectacle.” Their gazes locked and desire began to smolder in the depths of his brown eyes. “You completely disregarded Devon’s dignity when you allowed the guards to take advantage of her condition.”

“What would have been a better solution? She was clearly in need.”

He shrugged again. “A vibrator or a partner of her choosing, one more familiar with Therian females.”

Someone like you? She didn’t speak the question, knew it would piss him off. It became more apparent with each passing day that he had a thing for Devon. Carly couldn’t really blame him. Devon was gorgeous, intelligent and spirited. But allowing him to dwell on the feisty shifter made her less appealing, and that would never do.

“And how would you have made a spectacle out of me?” Rather than look away as she usually did, she stared deep into his eyes and tried not to shudder. Could she really let him touch her, kiss her, push inside her? He was an animal, just like the test subjects!

“I would have bent you over the conference table and held you down while one of the guards paddled your ass.”

Heat suffused her cheeks as the image formed within her mind. “That wouldn’t have been very professional.” She allowed a husky rasp to thicken her tone.

“Then I would have brought in the same men you set loose on Devon. I would have stood back and watched while they lifted you to the conference table and took turns fucking you.”

Slowly licking her lips, she glanced down and toyed with one of the buttons on her blouse. Watching the guards pleasure Devon had been exhilarating. It took very little imagination to relocate the scene to the conference room and substitute herself for Devon. “It’s an interesting fantasy, but it would be counterproductive to the point they were trying to make.”

He moved closer and his unique scent wrapped around her. She’d frequently noticed his faintly musky smell, but she’d never found it appealing before.

“Have you ever been spanked?”

She shook her head, glancing up at him through her lashes. “My love life has always been—tame.”

“Now you sound disappointed. Are you ready for a taste of something wild? You know I’m more than ready to give it to you.”

Catching her lower lip between her teeth, she fidgeted for a moment, as if she were mulling over the possibilities. “They’d dismiss me. They made their expectations crystal clear.”

His eyes gleamed and he placed his hands on her upper arms, slowly drawing her toward him. “I’m not staff and I’m not a test subject. I don’t see the complication.”

“I’m not sure the backers would see it that way.” She pulled against his hold and his fingers tightened on her arms. “I don’t want to lose my job.”

“They’ll see it however I want them to see it. If they dismiss you, I’ll walk. And they can’t do this without me.”

She nodded toward the door. “Should we go to one of our bedrooms?”

He turned her around and urged her toward the chair she’d just left. “This is less suspicious.”

She bent from the waist and rested her forearms on the chair. The sooner he started, the sooner this would be over. “Do you have a condom?”

“I can’t get you pregnant.” His voice sounded gruff and urgent.

She was on the Pill anyway, but she’d felt obligated to ask. “What about STDs?” Craning her neck, she looked at him, hoping for some hint of gentleness in his eyes. His head was bent, his attention completely focused on her body.

“Don’t have them and can’t get them.” He ran his hands up the backs of her thighs, pushing her skirt up as he went. “You have the most distracting ass. I’ve been watching it wiggle beneath those tight skirts for months.”

Suspecting this was how her night would end, she’d worn her one and only pair of black panties. She expected him to yank them down and get right to work. He certainly hadn’t wasted any time positioning her to his liking.

Instead, he snapped the elastic edge and said, “Take them off.”

With another deep breath to fortify her determination, she pulled down her panties and kicked them aside. Then she returned to her earlier position. He kneed her legs apart and settled his hands on her hips. The warm thickness of his shaft pushed between her thighs and Carly stilled. This was going to happen. She was going to have sex with a feline-shifter.

“You’re hot, but you’re not very wet.” He was wedged against her opening, but he didn’t thrust inside. He reached around her hip and cupped her mound, his middle finger gradually working its way between her folds. “Why give in now? You’ve made your position abundantly clear.”

His finger flicked her clit and Carly started. “They pissed me off.” She remained still, allowing him to manipulate her body while she carefully distanced her mind.

“Don’t like being told what to do?”

“Basically.” God, he was driving her crazy. He stayed right there at her entrance, teasing her with the potent promise of his first thrust while his fingertip doled out careful flicks and slow circles.

“Unbutton your blouse.”

The husky command stirred something deep inside her, made her body melt and soften. She’d expected to endure this, to sacrifice her dignity in the name of ambition. So why was she hovering on the brink of orgasm? She wasn’t supposed to enjoy this. He wasn’t even human!

But his hand felt so good and the blunt head of his cock created just enough pressure to make her ache for more.

She quickly unbuttoned her blouse and waited for his next directive.

He rotated her body, angling her toward the monitors until they could see their reflection on the screens. She moved her hands to the desktop and he kicked the chair aside. “Now take it off.”

Her hands trembled as she obeyed. Why was this exciting her? She never let her lovers take control. It was far more like her to push them down on the bed and climb on board.

With his free hand, he pulled her bra cups down, exposing her nipples without losing the firm support underneath. She was still mostly dressed, but he’d managed to expose all her intimate parts. It made her feel dirty and starkly sexual. This wasn’t driven by affection or even passion. This was elemental lust, raw and...animalistic.

“Oh yeah.” He rolled one of her nipples between his thumb and forefinger. “You have wonderful tits. Makes me want to bite.” Using his fingers to simulate teeth, he squeezed her nipple hard enough to make her yelp. “That’s right. Feel the burn.”

She instinctively arched her back and rested her head against his chest. He squeezed one nipple and then the other as his finger continued its teasing orbit of her clit. She felt restless and needful, ready for the slide of his body inside hers.

“I’m right there, Carly. If you want me, push back.”

It was a challenge. He wanted there to be no question about her willingness, no regrets once their lust cooled. Gripping the edge of the desk with both hands, she slowly pushed back. His hands steadied her hips while his shaft plowed into her waiting passage. No, he wasn't moving. Her core slid onto him, surrounding him with her sopping heat.

"So damn hot," he growled then his fingers tightened on her hips and he drew back.

His first real thrust rocked her forward, making her breasts bounce. Pleasure zinged through her body as his second stroke found her G-spot. "There." She gasped. "Right there."

He seemed happy to comply. With one hand on her hip and the other on her shoulder, he rode her fast and hard. The wet slap of their bodies and the shadowy reflection of their straining added to the sexual haze. She came suddenly, clamping down so hard he chuckled, but his hips didn't even slow.

She collapsed against the desk, forearms braced, afraid her knees would buckle and her legs would give out. His angle was different now, his cock head no longer rubbing her G-spot. She seldom came more than once, so it really didn't matter.

He reached over and entered a command into the computer. The image on the main screen changed and she suddenly faced the scene with Devon and the guards. She tensed, yet the erotic tableau was undeniably arousing. Had he done this to mock her or was he excited by the incident?

His pace sped and she had her answer. He was wild now, using her body as he immersed himself in the erotic scene. It had only taken one command to launch the image. This couldn't be the first time he'd watched the recording.

He returned his hand to her mound, and that clever finger resumed its steady stroking. She lifted onto the balls of her feet, giving him a bet-

ter angle. He slid smoothly, filling her completely with each demanding thrust.

Tuning out the recording, she watched their reflection in the monitor. He remained proudly erect while she bent in submissive surrender. Her breasts rubbed against the cool desktop, her nipples painfully sensitive. Tension gathered, the sensation growing with each rotation of his hips. Never before had her need been so strong or her responses so ready.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and pounded into her, keeping her upper body pressed against the desktop. His fingers caught her clit and slowly squeezed as he drove his full length into her. Pleasure exploded, tensing every muscle in her body and electrifying her nerve endings. She cried out, the sound echoing off the walls. He shuddered against her back, his arm tightening as he twitched inside her.

For a long moment the only sound was their panting, and then a low chuckle rumbled in his chest. He casually reached over and reactivated the live feed of Devon's room. "I knew you'd be a hot piece of ass, but damn, woman. I haven't come that hard in years."

She'd never had an orgasm like the one he'd just given her. Her knees shook and her inner muscles fluttered with little aftershocks.

He pulled out and quickly righted his clothes, but he grabbed the back of her neck before she could rise as well. "Was this a onetime rebellion or are you ready to explore even wilder pleasures?" His fingers stroked her creamy folds. He seemed fascinated by her slit.

"I don't want to lose my job," she whispered, squirming as his touch grew bolder.

"I told you that's not going to happen."

His slick fingers brushed across her anus and Carly froze. Was that what he meant by "wilder pleasures"? She'd always been tempted by the dark, forbidden nature of anal sex, but she'd never been bold enough to try it. She held her breath, waiting to see what he'd do next.

He reached around her with his other hand and effortlessly located her clit. “Are we done here?” He pushed his finger into her ass as he firmly rubbed her clit. The embers of her orgasm flamed back to life. Her inner muscles clenched and she cried out. “Or are you ready for more?”

“More.” She wiggled, driving his finger deeper. “I want more.”

“Glad to hear it.” He withdrew his finger and slapped her on the ass, his other hand deserting her as well. “When I’m ready to give it to you, I’ll let you know.” He slipped out the door as his triumphant laugh echoed in the small room.

With an exasperated cry, Carly straightened and pushed her skirt down to cover her shame. This hadn’t gone anything like she’d planned. She’d met her primary objective, but at what cost? She couldn’t let him use her desires against her. At the first sign of weakness, he’d pounce and devour her. Giving in to temptation would be self-defeating. And dangerous.

She sank on to the nearest chair and closed her eyes, drawing her blouse together over her sensitive nipples. Roberto was expecting a report detailing her progress. The backers would be thrilled to learn she’d seduced Osric so quickly, but somehow she would have to convince them she was still in control.



CARISSA LOVED DRIVING out of the mountains at night. Denver’s lights spread out across the plains, alive with life and promise. The city wasn’t large by metropolitan standards, but it was vibrant and unique.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Quinn prompted, his voice deep, almost sleepy.

She glanced at him, relieved to find his gaze alert and warm. He was remarkably easy to talk to, for such a rough-and-tumble badass. “I was just remembering.”

“Remembering what?”

“Mom took us to a performance of *Wicked* for our eighteenth birthday. We had a really nice dinner and then stayed in the Brown Palace so we didn’t have to drive home. The Buell is gorgeous and the play was amazing. It’s still one of the best nights of my life.” The bitter-sweet memory tightened her throat and made her heart ache. “I had no idea I’d lose her a few years later.”

He reached over and squeezed her hand. “Kyle will find Ava. You’re not going to lose her too.”

She hadn’t consciously made the connection, but he was right. The thought of losing Ava terrified her. And not just because of the danger her twin faced. Carissa had never been alone before, never considered a future without Ava’s love and support. They had both been devastated by their mother’s death, but they had faced the tragedy together.

“I’m scared.” She whispered the admission, unable to meet his gaze.

His warm hand covered hers again, but this time he kept it there, fingers loosely entwining with hers. “Anyone would be scared. I’d be worried if you weren’t.” He stroked the top of her hand with his thumb as his gaze returned to the road. “You’re not alone. You’ll understand that better once we reach the sanctuary.”

The sanctuary. Everyone who mentioned the place made it sound ominous or imposing. Where would Therians feel safe, especially in the middle of this conflict? “Why did Landon help us? He said he works for Erin, but who’s his father?”

“His father’s name is Nate Fitzroy. He’s the canine network’s Prime.”

“Which means Landon is in line to be the next canine Prime?”

“Alpha and Prime are not technically hereditary positions. The members of a clan, or pack in their case, must approve of their leader. But strong bloodlines tend to produce strong offspring. That’s why Nate is so interested in you.”

She shivered. “Nate wants to define me?”

“No. Like Osric, Nate already has a mate. And mated males don’t participate in definitions. He’ll either pressure you to mate with his son, or he’ll broker a—”

“But Landon is loyal to Erin.”

“Landon is his second son. I meant Bruce, his oldest.”

“Bruce is loyal to his father?”

“He’s loyal and ambitious, and mean. You don’t want to mate with Bruce Fitzroy.”

She didn’t want to “mate” with anyone. A hot pressure dropped into the pit of her stomach as she remembered how close she’d come to mating with Quinn and how wonderful what they’d done felt. No, they hadn’t been trying to mate. They’d just had sex, just succumbed to the magnetism drawing them together. Any permanent decision was a long ways off.

But the magnetism was undeniable. She’d never felt so captivated by a man, never imagined wanting someone as badly as she wanted Quinn. She didn’t understand the attraction, but she could no longer deny it was real.

Shaking away her sensual musings, she focused on their surroundings. He’d turned onto I-25 and they were headed north, away from Denver. Wouldn’t it be easier to hide within the bustle of a crowded city? Perhaps the risk of exposure was too great.

“Where is this sanctuary located?”

He shot her a sidelong glance, his lips subtly bowed. “You’ll see.”

It took just over an hour to reach the compound. Carissa opened the door and climbed down from the truck, anxious to stretch her legs. A variety of vehicles were scattered about the gravel lot and floodlights illuminated the main building.

They’d gotten off the highway and headed east for at least twenty miles, leaving the suburbs far behind. Surrounded by farmland and barren fields, the sanctuary was a cluster of buildings and wedge-shaped fenced lots.

She turned in a slow circle, assessing the location from a defense standpoint. The Therians could see an enemy approach from any direction. If the fences were electrified, it would seriously hamper any advance. Unless the enemy could jump as high as Quinn, then the fences would be pointless.

With a weary sigh, Carissa squinted into the darkness, trying to understand the purpose for the fenced-off lots. As if to answer her unspoken question, a feline roar echoed in the distance. "Was that a..."

Quinn chuckled, his smile bright even in the shadows. "Not often you hear a lion in Colorado?"

"Was that a Therian or a real lion?"

"Therian lions aren't real?" He swept his arm toward the lighted walkway and the building beyond.

"That's not what I meant."

"I'm just giving you a hard time. Come on."

She started for the front door, listening for more incongruous sounds. Within seconds, she heard several low growls and another muffled roar. "What is this place?"

"A big cat sanctuary of course." He pulled the door open for her and they entered a gift shop well stocked with stuffed animals and educational souvenirs. "They rehabilitate neglected and abused cats from all over the world."

"Feline shapeshifters run a big cat sanctuary?" She shook her head, barely able to suppress her laughter. "This is too funny."

"The sanctuary is more than just a cover. Erin has committed years of her life and a good deal of her fortune to this cause. But as you guessed, there's more to the sanctuary than abused circus cats."

He led her through the gift shop and along a raised walkway that led to the round building situated in the middle of the wedge-shaped pens. Tigers, cougars and a painfully thin male lion each had their own enclosure.

One of the tigers lifted its head as she approached. Its large gold-green eyes were curious yet sad. Carissa stopped in front of the gate and went down on one knee, instinctively inhaling the tiger's scent. Female, hopelessness and fear. This poor girl had been horribly abused. The tiger inched closer to the front of the pen, her curiosity obviously warring with her fear.

"Be careful. Sometimes they're not as harmless as they look."

She glanced up at Quinn and smiled. "Isn't that true of all big cats?"

The tiger halted its tentative approach well back from the gate. "She looks so sad."

"She's new. I don't know her story."

Carissa was so fascinated by the animals that Quinn had to gently pull her into the center building. "I'll find someone to give us a tour in the morning. I need to let Erin know Nate's on the move."

She followed him through the unusual building, peering into each room they passed. There were treatment areas, stockrooms, even indoor pens. "This place is incredible."

"And you haven't even seen the best part yet." He pulled open a door indistinguishable from the others and revealed a staircase.

Unsure what to expect, she warily descended the stairs. Her heart beat faster with each step she took and an odd tension gripped her stomach. A short, tiled corridor led to a control room. Security cameras and computers were arranged in six neat stations. Only one of the stations was manned at the moment and Carissa wondered what sort of event would require five additional operators.

The guard-technician swiveled his chair around as they entered the room. "Jenaro." His tone was terse, his hazel eyes hostile.

"Erin's expecting us."

He ignored the response and pushed to his feet. "I'm Eli. Welcome to sanctuary." He stuck out his hand and smiled, drawing her attention to his gold-green eyes. Awareness replaced the mistrust and the smile softened his features. With shaggy blond hair and a rich golden tan, he

looked like the ski bums who put their lives on hold as soon as the first snowflake hit the Rockies.

“Carissa.” She shook his hand, annoyed by the sudden difference in his attitude.

“They’re all out at Erin’s house. I’ll let her know you’ve arrived.”

Eli seemed friendly enough until he looked at Quinn, and then resentment radiated off him in tangible waves. Would all the Therians be like this? No wonder Quinn lived alone. “Nice to meet you,” she said as Quinn led her from the room.

They hurried along a tunnel and Carissa shivered. The hard-packed earth and thick timber supports reminded her of a mine shaft. At least there were electric lights. Tromping through this underground passage with nothing but a flashlight would have been creepy and claustrophobic.

The tunnel branched off in several places, but Quinn seemed to know where he was going. “Where do the other tunnels lead?”

“To other houses. The cat sanctuary sits on thirty acres, but the network owns almost two hundred. The tunnels were dug over several generations. Now they connect all the network properties, making it possible to pass from one to another without exposure and little risk.”

“And the neighbors have no idea any of this is here?”

“Their closest neighbor is half a mile away.”

When they reached the end of the tunnel, Quinn knocked on the stout wooden door. The peephole seemed to blink as someone moved in front of the tiny lens. Then she heard the lock click and the door was opened.

“Jenaro.” Ian held the door open as they moved into a large laundry room. He winked at Carissa then led them upstairs.

They emerged in a mudroom at the back of the house, which opened onto a large country kitchen. With a cheerful décor that featured roosters and well-organized counters, the overall impression was rustic yet cozy.

The low rumble of numerous voices warned Carissa that Erin wasn't alone. Ian walked into the living room without interrupting the conversation and sat beside Erin on the couch. Carissa and Quinn remained standing as the others rearranged, allowing her to sit beside Quinn on the matching loveseat. The room was warm and welcoming, much like its primary occupant.

"We all know damn good and well the only purpose for the dictate is to provoke us." Jake, the tiger-biker Carissa had met earlier, tapped his booted foot, as if his anxious energy demanded release.

"Provoke us into what?" a massive bearded man on Jake's right asked. Gray strands threaded through his dark hair, but his bushy beard was entirely gray. He glanced at Carissa, his eyes so dark, she couldn't distinguish between iris and pupil. "None of us is willing to wage war on our own clan regardless of how misguided the alphas have become."

"The alphas aren't misguided, they're allowing themselves to be controlled by outside forces," Jake argued. "It's the outside forces we need to confront."

The burly man snorted. "Good luck with that."

"What's going on?" Quinn asked as the conversation lulled.

Erin scooted to the edge of the couch, her cheeks rosy, green eyes bright. "The Alpha Council took advantage of Kyle's distraction to rule on several controversial requests, including Osric's petition regarding Ava."

That snapped Carissa to full alert. "What does that mean? What did they say about Ava?"

Before Erin could respond, the burly man stood and crossed the room. "Name's Holt." He stuck out his massive hand with obvious expectation. She shook his hand, impressed by the controlled strength of his firm grip. His fingers released and he went on. "You know Jake and that mean son of a bitch is Dilbert Payne." He leaned down and added in a stage whisper, "But don't call him Dilbert. Makes him cranky. He prefers Payne."

“In more ways than one,” Jake added with a snicker.

Carissa looked at Payne and inclined her head. He’d been so still and silent, she’d hardly noticed him sitting there. With thick tawny hair and gleaming gold eyes, he reminded her of a lion. Not the sickly specimen she’d seen at the sanctuary, but a lethal, wild lion crouched in wait for its unsuspecting prey.

Payne returned her subtle nod then shifted his gaze back to Erin. He still didn’t speak.

“How did the council respond to Osric?” Quinn prompted as Holt ambled back to his chair.

“Ava has until Friday to name her mate and then Osric is approved to choose her mate for her and see that she’s defined,” Erin explained then her gaze darted toward Carissa. “Nate has been granted the same rights regarding you.”

“This is ridiculous,” Carissa flared. “Can’t we appeal to the next level? The Prime Council or whatever?”

“If Kyle submits an appeal, he can’t vote,” Ian reminded her. “I’d vote in Ava’s favor, but that leaves the decision up to Nate and Fredrick. Obviously, Nate would vote against you. Fredrick is Prime of the Southern Feline network, but his decisions are unpredictable.” Ian shook his head. “It’s not worth the risk. Disobeying an order from the Prime Council is grounds for lifelong banishment or worse.”

“There has to be something we can do.” Anxiety zinged through her system speeding her heart and making her fidgety. “Where the hell is Ava? Are people still searching for her?”

“As you know, the wolves have shifted their focus to you, but Kyle and our hunters are doing their best to find her.” Erin stood and walked toward Carissa. Her regal bearing commanded attention while her voice remained calm. “If Ava were on the run, Kyle would have found her by now. But her car is still parked at home. She hasn’t used a credit card or touched her phone. Willona taught you two how to disappear and that’s exactly what Ava has done.”

“No one just disappears,” Quinn objected. “Someone must be hiding her.”

“We agree.” Erin looked back at Carissa as she asked, “Can you think of anyone who would shelter her or anywhere she would go? Somewhere safe and secluded?”

Carissa searched her memory. They had so few friends. Neither of their employees were in a position to help and... “There’s no one. Has Kyle been back to our house or checked the store? Is it possible she sneaked back in once everyone left?”

“That’s not a bad idea.” Erin nodded, speculation clouding her gaze. “Kyle might have already thought of it, but I’ll text him with the suggestion.”

Scooting closer to Quinn, Carissa let the heat of his body soothe her. She and Ava were facing the same basic threat, but Ava was alone and unaware of the support system available to her. It was almost impossible for Carissa to focus on the future and the decisions awaiting her while her sister’s situation was still so uncertain.

Compassion warmed Erin’s gaze and she reached down and squeezed Carissa’s hand. “We’ll find her.”

Carissa’s only response was a weak smile and Erin returned to her seat beside Ian.

“The other dictates are bullshit,” Jake muttered. “They’ve drawn a line in the sand and they’re forcing people to pick a side.”

“They want to know where our loyalties lie,” Holt agreed. “Can’t blame them for that, but this was an underhanded way of going about it.”

“Bureaucrats are always underhanded. Why do you sound surprised?” Payne’s voice was deep, his words formed with an accent Carissa didn’t recognize. Russian maybe. “When you figure out a plan of action, let me know. I am weary of talk.” He pushed to his feet then faced Carissa. “I am thrilled that we have finally found you. We need you far more than you realize.”

A shiver sped down her spine as his golden gaze drilled into hers. "I'll do whatever I can." It sounded hollow, useless. Like the obligatory "sorry for your loss" she'd been offered when her mother died. He accepted her statement with a nod then left the room. "What an unusual accent. Where is he from?"

Erin smiled and crossed her legs, appearing more relaxed. "He's only been in the States for a couple of months, but most of his clan lives in Georgia."

"Did he move down there or is he just visiting his relatives?" She wasn't sure why, but the sullen lion-shifter definitely intrigued her.

"He hasn't decided yet."

"Where did he live before he came to the States?"

"Prague," Holt told her, his tone a bit dismissive. "He's not wrong to be impatient. We need to figure out our next move and get on with it."

"This won't be over until they're both defined." Ian stretched his arm out along the back of the couch as he gazed at Carissa. He rested his ankle on his opposite knee, his foot bobbing absently.

"And that can only happen once," Erin stressed. "We cannot squander this opportunity."

"I'm with Payne." Holt stood and rubbed the back of his neck. "Call me when you figure out what you want to do next. Strategy is not my strong suit." He walked down the hall and disappeared into the kitchen. Carissa heard a door open and close then his heavy footfalls on the stairs leading down to the tunnels. *He must live in one of the network's other houses.*

"What sort of shifter is he?" It didn't matter, but she wanted to know.

"Bear," Ian said. "He's one of eight still in existence."

"Is Payne a lion?"

"Among other things." Jake chuckled. "I was under the impression we need to find Ava before Osric gets his hands on her, and define them

both before Nate succeeds in stealing Carissa from under our noses. Have our objectives changed?”

Erin’s frustration was starting to show. Her features tensed and her tone thinned. “Those are our objectives, but there are—”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Jake cut in. “If Quinn isn’t up to the task, I’ll—”

“I’m more than up to the task!” Quinn shot to his feet, hands fisted at his sides.

“She needs more time to—”

“We don’t have more time.” Jake cut Erin off again. “The entire network is in chaos and it doesn’t need to be.” He stood and turned his indignation on Carissa. “I’m sorry this is sudden and you feel overwhelmed, but this needs to be resolved as quickly as possible. Too many people are being risked needlessly.”

Carissa hadn’t thought about the danger others were enduring on her behalf, but Jake was right. If she let Quinn define her, the wolves would have no reason to pursue her and everyone who was working to protect her could turn their efforts toward finding Ava.

Erin stood and marched right up to Jake, facing off with the lethal-looking tiger with no hint of intimidation. “You’re right. Defining Carissa tonight would go a long way toward defusing the conflict. She would be safe from the wolves—for now. But do you honestly believe Nate wouldn’t retaliate? He’s been so understanding in the past. And what would be sacrificed for this momentary lull? We’re trying to reawaken the Omni Prime. Is it really worth throwing that possibility away so we can sleep better tonight?”

He didn’t back down, but his tone softened, became more respectful. “I understand the long-term goal, but we have to examine every option. If we define Carissa now, we would be able to focus all of our resources on finding Ava. And once Ava’s located, you would still be able to attempt the ritual with her.”

“The choice is Carissa’s.” Erin seemed to relent then she added, “But she has other options as well. We could attempt a seeker circle, access her connection to Ava and use it to locate Ava’s hiding place.”

Jake looked at Carissa and then back at Erin, his expression revealing nothing of his thoughts. “Has that ever been attempted with a latent female?”

“Most of this has never been attempted in our lifetime,” Erin reminded him. “Ian and I are both strong telepaths, and Carissa and Ava are twins. What do we have to lose by trying?”

Jake folded his arms over his chest and fell silent. Tension curled around them, drawing Carissa to the edge of the loveseat. What was this “seeker circle”? Erin had described Therian powers, mind links and psychic dreams, but the only ability Carissa had actually experienced so far was Erin’s healing touch. Unless she counted all the shapeshifting.

“As you said, the final choice is Carissa’s,” Jake finally gave in. “I won’t push the issue tonight. But if one more drop of tiger blood is spilled because of your hesitation, we’ll finish this conversation.” He started for the front door then stopped and looked at Carissa. “If the seeker circle doesn’t work, remember Quinn’s not the only one capable of defining you. Any of us would be honored to include you in our clan.”



Chapter Nine



Releasing his pent-up breath in a controlled stream, Quinn shifted his gaze from the door through which Jake had just departed to the woman at his side. Carissa fidgeted on the edge of her seat, obviously unnerved by Jake's casual offer to define her. Just the thought of any other man sharing something so intimate with Carissa made Quinn restless and edgy. With each moment that passed, Carissa's mind and body moved into closer sync with his. He couldn't hear her thoughts yet, but he could sense her confusion and frustration. She was fighting hard to take it all in without losing control of her emotions. But who wouldn't be overwhelmed by all these changes?

And she wasn't alone in her anxiety. Visiting the sanctuary was always bittersweet for Quinn. This was Kyle's stronghold. And it had once been as close to a home as Quinn had ever known. After his parents died, Quinn had been taken in by the cougar clan, basically adopted by Erin as a companion for her son. Quinn had grown up with Kyle and the other cougars had gradually accepted him. Until Quinn's abilities began to manifest.

Now he was an outsider again, mistrusted and shunned.

But Carissa trusted him. She might not understand all the details of being a Therian, but she had instinctively accepted him while she pushed other males away. There was no way he was going to screw that up.

"No one is defining you but me," he whispered, reaching for her hand.

Rather than being comforted by his assurance, she slipped her hand out from under his and stood.

His heart lurched and he closed his hand into a fist. He would not let this happen again. He couldn't survive another rejection. He'd stotically accepted his banishment and hardened his heart against the pain. This was different. This was more important than anything he'd faced before. He would never accept defeat. He'd fight for Carissa, court her in any way she needed until he earned her trust.

"The choice belongs to Carissa and only Carissa," Erin stressed. "Despite the increased danger, I believe she needs more time to make an informed decision."

"The last thing I want is to create tension between you and your allies," Carissa told the older woman.

"They aren't my allies." Erin smiled, the expression faintly maternal. "We're united by a common cause but I'm not their leader. If this rebellion belongs to anyone, it's you and Ava."

Carissa glanced at him, awareness still smoldering in her deep-blue eyes. All was not lost. She hadn't rejected him. She was just intimidated and confused. He couldn't blame her for her uncertainty. They'd thrust a lifetime of knowledge on her in a few short days. She'd been kidnapped, shot, threatened and hunted. And the challenges had just begun.

She brushed a stray strand of hair off her forehead then squared her shoulders as she turned back to Erin. "Then why did Jake and Landon both say they answered to you?"

Despite the challenge in Carissa's tone, Erin remained unruffled. "I know more about the Omni Prime than anyone else, but I'm just the messenger." Carissa said nothing more, so Erin asked, "Do you want to try this now, or would you rather get some sleep and try first thing in the morning? I know you're still recovering from your injury."

"I'll sleep better if I know Ava's safe. Let's do it now."

Erin rose and motioned everyone toward the middle of the room.

Quinn pushed to his feet but hung back, gaze fixed on Ian. “This might go smoother if I’m not in the meld.” The thought of Ian in Carissa’s mind infuriated Quinn. Still, he couldn’t let his resentment hinder her chances of locating her sister. Finding Ava wasn’t just important to Carissa, it was vital to their cause.

“Nonsense.” Erin waved away his concern. “You can’t let the past compromise the future. Ian will navigate the pulse, but he’ll need as much energy as we can provide.”

Ian didn’t look happy about Erin’s decision either, but he didn’t object. His features tensed as he approached Carissa. “It’s been a long time since I participated in one of these and I seldom navigate.”

“You’re stronger than I am,” Erin insisted. “It’s like riding a bicycle. You’ll do fine.”

It was obvious Ian didn’t share her confidence as he reluctantly took his place in front of Carissa. Quinn moved up behind her and threaded his fingers through hers. He had to be near her, touching her, protecting her. He shouldn’t feel this possessive. He hadn’t even joined with her fully, but his cat tossed its head and prowled ever closer to the surface.

Erin stood at Carissa’s side and placed one hand on the shoulder of each man. Her face was expressionless, her posture relaxed.

Ian hesitated another moment then framed Carissa’s face with his hands. “Close your eyes.”

Carissa did.

Quinn molded himself to her back and buried his face in her soft hair. Her scent calmed his restless cat while Quinn slowly eased into her mind. Their connection was still a fragile thread rather than the solid cord that would one day bind them—if she accepted him as mate. He pushed the possibility away, refusing to be distracted by the future. He located the fiber and poured energy into her mind, strengthening and reassuring her. She sighed and squeezed his hands, pressing back against his chest.

Delving deeper, Quinn was enveloped by the blackness swirling through her consciousness. She was aware of him, recognized his familiar presence, yet she remained unsure. A steady pressure pushed against the involuntary shields protecting her mind, her being. She tried to relax, to cooperate with the meld, but trepidation coursed through her, making her wary.

“Relax,” Ian coaxed. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Come through me,” Erin advised. “Her instincts might accept me more easily.”

“Why?” Ian sounded annoyed.

“I’m not a threat to Quinn,” Erin explained. “She senses your hostility and instinctively protects her mate. It’s only natural.”

“Quinn is not her mate!”

“Not yet,” Quinn stressed with a challenging smile while hope made him feel almost giddy. If Erin sensed his connection with Carissa, it had to be more than wishful thinking.

Ian lowered his hands and stepped back. “If you’d kept your hands off her in the first place, she wouldn’t flinch every time I touch her.”

Quinn wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her snugly against his body. “She seems perfectly satisfied with my touch.”

“I might not be able to satisfy her until her system resets, but I would have kept her safe.” Ian’s eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared.

“She was in your house when she took the bullet,” Quinn snapped.

“And she was in yours when the wolves attacked!” Ian raked a hand through his hair, glaring at Quinn. “Guess that makes us even.”

“Even?” Quinn scoffed. “Not even close.” He forced his jaw to relax and then added, “Your irrational crusade ruined my life! I live like a hermit, thanks to you.” He’d bit his tongue and swallowed his pride for the last time. The tragedy had not been entirely his fault and he was tired of accepting the blame.

Carissa twisted out of his grasp and moved away. “Do we have to do this now?”

“Yes!” he and Ian shouted in unison.

Erin motioned Carissa to her side while a subtle flicker of amusement winked within her eyes. “Have it out, boys. It’s been a long time coming.”

Ian threw the first punch, but Quinn jerked to the side and the blow barely grazed his cheek. Fueled by four and a half years of bottled-up hostility, Quinn retaliated. His fist landed squarely on Ian’s nose. Blood burst from Ian’s nostrils and the females gasped.

Erin shoved the coffee table out of their way and drew Carissa farther away from the fight.

“We’re just going to stand here and let them beat the hell out of each other?” Carissa’s voice trembled, but Quinn kept his attention squarely focused on his antagonist.

They silently circled then Ian threw a wild right, which Quinn easily dodged. “You’ll have to do better than that, old man.” Ian landed a punch to Quinn’s gut. Quinn grunted then laughed. “No room to unfurl your wings.” He slammed his fist into Ian’s jaw, snapping his head back. “Puts you at a serious disadvantage.” He jabbed with his left, catching Ian on the chin. The raptor’s head jerked sharply to the side and he staggered back a step, momentarily off balance.

Shaking away the impact, Ian shuffled to his right and raised his fists in an attempt to guard his battered face.

“This wound has been festering for years,” Erin told Carissa. “It desperately needs to be lanced.”

Quinn lunged, jamming his shoulder into the taller man’s stomach. Ian flew backward and hit the wall. Hard. Pictures rattled and Ian shouted, “You’re a worthless coward. We don’t make war on women!”

“I was doing my job!” Quinn snarled.

“You were reckless and ambitious, so desperate to make a name for yourself that you leveled anyone who got in your way.” Ian shoved Quinn back but remained against the wall. “You were willing to do

whatever it took to get your man and Jillian suffered for your ruthlessness.”

“If she hadn’t been high, my pulse wouldn’t have—”

“That is so fucking typical!” Ian advanced, a fresh burst of fury blazing in his eyes. “Men like you have been blaming their victims for centuries.”

“Men like me?” Quinn clenched his fists, his voice low and gravelly. “Don’t pretend you know me, raptor. Before I went after your worthless friend, we hadn’t spoken in three years.”

Ian stilled, his features frozen in an angry snarl. Had the criticism penetrated his anger? “I didn’t need to know you. I saw what you were capable of and knew the rumors about you were true.” His tone was far less assertive now. Despite Ian’s outward hostility, Quinn could sense the raptor thinking, his anger melting.

“Are the rumors about you true?” Quinn kept his tone even, non-confrontational. “Were you Jillian’s lover? Did Russell share her with you?”

Ian’s only response was to flip him the bird.

“Rumors are often based on a kernel of truth, but they’re seldom dependable.”

“You didn’t know what would happen to Jillian?” Ian sounded begrudging even as the words slipped past his lips.

“I figured she would need her husband and I would follow her to my mark. That’s all.” He paused, hoping for some outward sign that Ian was accepting his explanation. Ian appeared to be listening, but his expression was unreadable. “The rest was beyond my control and I have regretted the outcome every day since it happened.”

Erin snatched a box of tissues off the end table and handed it to Ian. “The past is past,” Erin said as the silence lengthened. Ian cleaned his face as best he could and pressed a wad of tissues to his nose. “You both need to let it go,” she persisted.

It wasn't easy to let go of four and a half years of bitterness, but Quinn knew he had to try. Carissa had to be accepted by the clans or Erin's plans would topple like a house of cards. But it wasn't just Carissa. He was tired of being angry, tired of resentment eating away at his sanity. He was ready for something different, something more.

"It's gone." Quinn watched for Ian's reaction to the opening.

Erin punched him in the arm and Ian fought back a smile. "Fine. I'll get over it, starting now."

Quinn stuck out his hand and Ian shook it.

The anger gradually cleared from Ian's eyes, but Quinn knew this was only the beginning. Every cat in the network felt much as Ian did. Quinn would have to prove himself over and over again. He released Ian's hand and looked at Carissa, determination cutting through the gloom. She was the key to his future, his only hope at happiness. But she would be harder than hell to win until she knew her sister was safe.

"We're all tired and irritable," Erin said. "Maybe it's best if we wait until morning to attempt the meld."

Ian quickly agreed while Carissa seemed disappointed.

"I'll see you in the morning." Ian kissed Erin on the cheek, inclined his head toward Carissa and headed off through the kitchen.

"The guestroom is ready or I can set up the pullout if you'd rather have separate beds." Erin looked to Carissa for the answer.

"The guestroom is fine." Carissa glanced at him as color spread across her cheeks. Desire trickled across their link and her gaze smoldered. "I'll feel safer if Quinn's in the same room with me."

"Of course you will," Erin said with a knowing smile. "It's this way." She led them to a charming bedroom off the main hallway. "That door leads to the bathroom, which is also accessible from the hall, so make sure you lock the door when you use it. Two of Kyle's men are using his room while he's out hunting."

Wanting to shift Carissa's attention from Ava's peril, Quinn asked, "Have you made any progress with Devon? Has she agreed to come home?"

"She still sends me texts at least once a day. Today I demanded that she call me, told her anyone could send a text and I wanted to hear her voice. She called a few minutes later, but she sounded really odd."

"Odd in what way?"

"Like she was drunk or high or something." Erin crossed her arms over her chest and sadness tinged her smile. "Her father died eight months ago. I thought she was just working through her grief and rebelling against authority in general, but she's scaring me to death."

"I understand the feeling," Carissa crossed the room and gave Erin a hug. "As soon as we find Ava, Kyle can focus entirely on finding Devon."

"That's the plan." She paused with her hand on the door knob. "You two get some sleep tonight. We need you both rested and alert in the morning." With a final wave, she stepped into the hall and closed the door.

Carissa's heartbeat tripped as Erin left her alone with Quinn. He'd insisted she stop using the nasal spray and her desire for him had gradually rekindled in the hours that followed. She no longer felt the consuming urgency that had erupted after her first contact with a Therian male. This was slower, deeper heat, one that sank into the marrow of her bones. She longed for the intimate connection and the emotional exchange she'd experienced each time they touched.

Quinn placed his hands on her shoulders and drew her closer. "You okay?"

"I don't know." A nervous laugh escaped and she lowered her gaze. "This is all so overwhelming."

"Then we'll wait." One of his hands moved to her neck, fingers curving around the back while his thumb caressed her skin. "I won't add to your confusion."

She shook her head and looked into his eyes. "You're the only part of this that doesn't confuse me. Erin insists I'm a player in some ancient drama, but I feel completely displaced." She raised her hands to his chest and unfastened the first few buttons on his flannel shirt. He'd donned the long-sleeved garment before they left his cabin, and the rustic style perfectly matched his rugged good looks. "When you touch me, I feel connected to all the things Erin describes. Without you, I'm not sure I can deal with all of this."

He leaned down and brushed her lips with his. The gesture was more of a comforting caress than an arousing kiss. "I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right here every step of the way."

She quickly worked the rest of the buttons then wrapped her arms around him, inside his open shirt. His chest was warm and the muscular contours of his back felt amazing beneath her curious fingers. "I'm not ready to be defined. Can you control yourself well enough to just make love to me?"

"As long as your body is responding the way it was meant to respond, I'll be fine."

"I haven't used the mist since this morning. Or I guess that would be yesterday morning by now."

"Then we have nothing to worry about."

Feminine power rolled through her, making her crave what little control he'd allow. All too soon he'd take over, command her body and guide her spirit one step closer to her Therian destiny. She needed to touch him and watch him surrender part of himself to her.

"I want to be sure." She pulled his shirt down his arms and tossed it aside then reached for the metal button on the waistband of his jeans. "Besides, I think it will help with your control if we take the edge off your hunger."

His body tensed as she lowered his zipper, but he made no move to stop her. He watched her closely, eyes passion bright and narrowed. She helped him remove his boots then tugged off his socks. The air around

them seemed to crackle with heat and energy. She reached for his jeans and he caught her wrists then shook his head.

“You don’t touch me until you’re naked too.”

Rather than reply, she kicked off her shoes and pulled her shirt off over her head. He had her pants unzipped by the time she tossed her shirt aside and his warm breath teased her heated skin as he leaned in to help her take them off. Her socks and underwear followed then she returned her attention to his jeans. He wore nothing beneath the sturdy denim, and soon they faced each other naked and trembling with anticipation.

Her gaze slowly traveled the length of his body. She’d grown accustomed to his handsome features, but the strength so apparent in his corded muscles and lean hips made her mouth water and her fingers itch. She moved closer and rested her hands on his chest. His gaze bore into hers, yet his arms remained at his sides.

“Go on,” he urged. “I’m here for you, hellion. Do whatever you like.”

Desire curled through her, stirring sensations as it flowed from her chest to her groin. She wanted to touch him, press against him and taste him. She wanted to feel him slide against her tongue and shake with his need to come. But most of all, she wanted to watch him abandon himself to her, to trust her with his pleasure.

She ran her hands up to his shoulders and squeezed. He was broad and powerfully built, obviously capable of coping with anything that fate sent their way. His arms were long and stacked with muscle, perfect to wrap around her and keep her safe. She explored him from shoulder to fingertip before returning to his chest. Flattening one hand over his heart, she moved the other across his side and down his spine.

Purposely ignoring her destination, she pressed against him and cupped his ass with both hands. “The way you look in jeans is sinful, but this should be against the law.”

He chuckled, his hands still at his sides. “I’m glad you approve.”

She ran her hands down the backs of his thighs, sinking to her knees as her fingers descended. His erection blazed a trail from her belly to the valley between her breasts. Then she moved back and his potent length arched toward her, more than ready for a more intimate exploration.

“You don’t have to do this,” he assured, his tone soft yet needful.

“I know.” She slid one hand around and eased it between his thighs, gently cradling his balls. “I want to watch you lose control.” Her other hand closed around his shaft, stroking from base to tip with firm pressure.

He groaned, features tense, jaw clenched against the pleasure.

She watched his face as she closed her lips around his tip, fascinated by the heat and the hardness. It wasn’t as if she’d never done this before, but Quinn was so much more...manly than anyone she’d ever touched. Her other lovers shrank in his shadow until only Quinn remained.

She took him deeper, savoring the velvet-soft skin as he slid against her lips and across her tongue. His scent filled her nose and his taste gradually spread through her mouth. She sucked and swirled her tongue, moving her mouth slowly up and down his length.

His hand tangled in her hair then released, coming to rest on her shoulder instead. “Faster.” Half plea, half demand, the word burst from his lips.

She sucked harder and moved faster, thrilled by his obvious delight. He rocked his hips, matching her movements without taking over. His taste grew stronger, proof of his rising desire. She paused to enjoy the evocative taste, swiping her tongue across his sensitive tip until he groaned with each lick.

“If you don’t stop I’ll...” Tension rolled down his thighs as he fought back his orgasm. “I’m almost there.”

She grasped his hips and took him deeper, her lips sucking stubbornly. He arched his neck, eyes tightly closed as his control finally snapped. He pushed to the back of her mouth and came in shuddering

waves. She swallowed and swallowed again, tingling heat marking the path of his seed as it slid down her throat.

“So good,” he muttered as he drew her to her feet. His arms enfolded her and he tilted her head back as his mouth sealed over hers. The kiss was deep yet tender as his tongue delved between her parted lips. He had to taste himself in her mouth, but he seemed unconcerned, perhaps even pleased. “Thank you.”

He whispered the words against her lips and Carissa smiled. “I was just returning the favor,” she reminded him.

“I’m not keeping score.” He pulled back the covers and urged her down on the side of the bed. Then he knelt on the floor and eased her legs apart. “It will take my body a minute or two to recover. I know how I intend to spend the time.”

She leaned back on her elbows and raised her heels to the edge of the mattress, boldly spreading her thighs. He made her feel desirable and sexy, unashamed of her need.

He brushed his hands down the insides of her thighs then slipped his fingers under her while his thumbs gently parted her folds. “You’re already wet.” He grinned. “Did you enjoy having my cock in your mouth?”

“I enjoyed the way you trembled and moaned.” She returned his smile.

“Let’s see how long it takes you to tremble.” With his gaze still locked with hers, he leaned down and traced her slit with the tip of his tongue.

The soft stroke sent desire spiraling through her core. Her toes curled over the edge of the mattress and her hips pushed up into his kiss. He was so damn good at this, and knowing he wouldn’t stop this time made each touch even sweeter.

His tongue circled her clit, his thumbs caressing as well as parting. Tension gathered low in her belly and her inner muscles clenched, ac-

centing the emptiness he would soon fill. She rocked against his mouth, too restless to remain passive.

He pulled one hand out from under her and looked into her eyes as he pushed two fingers deep into her passage. The fullness felt wonderful, but it was just a teasing hint of what she really needed. She squeezed his fingers and the tension inside her mounted.

“Your turn.” He moved his other hand as well, covering her clit with his thumb. “I want to watch you come.”

Unable to resist such a delightful suggestion, she abandoned herself to his touch. He pumped his fingers in and out as his thumb passed over her clit. She was so wet his fingers slid smoothly and the pleasure rapidly built.

Her orgasm hit suddenly, clamping her core down around his fingers. He kept them deep inside and prolonged the spasms with his thumb. She cried out and her thighs shook as the sensations radiated through her body.

Before the last tingle passed, he draped her legs over his arms and pulled her hips to the edge of the bed. She felt him press against her entrance, but he didn’t thrust inside.

“Open for me, hellion.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant until she felt his presence nudge against her mind. Unlike when Ian tried to push inside her, she didn’t feel intimidated or afraid. This was Quinn. He would never hurt her, had had many opportunities to take advantage of her, and yet he had protected her at every turn.

Grasping the backs of her knees, she opened herself wider, inviting him into her mind and her body. He drove inward, penetrating her slowly as his cock filled her core. She accepted him without hesitation, welcoming him with a rush of affection as well as the wet grip of her sheath.

He pulled back then surged forward, secure in her surrender. His energy blazed through her mind, intense and powerful. She absorbed

the emotions he offered so freely and shared her feelings just as readily. She let go of her knees and grasped his shoulders, drawing him down for a passionate kiss.

His body slid against her and into her as their mouths met and meshed. He tasted of her pleasure and each thrust of her tongue mingled his taste with hers. He ran his hands up her sides, pausing to cup her breasts before drawing her arms above her head. He held her wrists tightly as his thrusts became more demanding.

She wasn't struggling, wasn't sure why he felt the need to hold her down. Then primal aggression threaded through his gentler emotions. This was his cat, his Therian self, demanding her submission. A heated shiver sped down her spine, sparking an elemental response in her.

He moved faster and deeper, his tongue echoing each drive. She yielded, drawing in his scent and savoring the flavor of their combined release. Her eagerness drew a harsh growl from his throat, but joy flowed into her mind. He was thrilled by her trust and overwhelmed with her enthusiasm. He tore his mouth away from hers and pushed up on his elbows, allowing him to speed the tempo of his hips.

She pulled her legs up along his sides and angled her pelvis to better accommodate his frantic thrusting. Their gazes locked and burned with emotions every bit as powerful as the pleasure surging between them. Golden light burst from his eyes and he drove his full length into her. She wrapped her legs around his waist as her body echoed each distinct spasm. They clung to each other for long, silent minutes, lost in the wonder of their joining.

He wrapped his arms around her and rolled to his side, taking her with him. *Can you hear me?*

He pushed the thought across their link and she smiled. *Loud and clear. Can you hear me?*

Perfectly. He eased his arm beneath her neck and covered her mouth with his. *Now we don't have to stop kissing if you want to ask a question.*

Will Erin and the others be able to hear my thoughts too?

He separated their mouths with the shake of his head. "That will come after you're defined."

"Does it hurt?" She was so relaxed, so content, she was struggling to keep her eyes open.

"I don't know. Only females are defined."

She nodded. "Did your first shift hurt?"

He brushed her hair back from her damp face as his gaze moved over her face. "It was more frightening than painful for me, but I've heard others complain about the pain."

Swallowing past the lump rapidly forming in her throat, she refused to dwell on the details. "How old were you when you first transformed?"

"Thirteen."

"Do children ever shift?"

"It's extremely rare. Most Therian males begin transforming in their early teens."

"Are females ever defined that early or do most wait until the deadline is drawing near?"

He eased his hand between their bodies and covered her breast, his fingers gently squeezing. "It depends on the family. The average age is probably closer to eighteen than twenty-one."

His touch ignited her slumbering desire, but she tried to ignore the tingling heat. "Have you ever defined anyone?"

"Twice." He rolled to his back, bringing her with him. She bent her knees and straddled his hips, pushing up against his chest. "Ride me, hellion." He grasped her hips and ensured that she obeyed.

"Do you always get hard this fast?" She gasped as he arched, driving his shaft deep inside her.

"Only with you." He reached up and pulled her mouth down to his.



CARISSA WOKE UP ALONE the following morning. Quinn's scent surrounded her, clinging to her skin as well as the bedding, but he was nowhere in sight. A neat stack of clothes awaited her in a chair by the bathroom door. Devon wasn't going to have any clothes left if Erin kept this up. Thankful for the thoughtfulness, Carissa took a quick shower and dressed then went in search of her missing...lover? Mate? What role would Quinn play in her life?

When Erin claimed Carissa was resisting Ian because he threatened her mate, Carissa hadn't thought too much about it. Even Quinn's possessive response hadn't fully registered until she felt the connection growing between them.

Quinn made love with his body and his mind. Feeling his emotions build and deepen each time they joined had been unlike anything Carissa had ever experienced before. She'd been thrilled by his tenderness. It was such a contrast to his gruff exterior. There was still far too much unresolved for her to think seriously about a permanent bonding, but she was sure enjoying this preview.

Quinn sat at the kitchen table with Erin sipping coffee and munching on a piece of toast.

"Good morning," Erin greeted, motioning her toward an empty chair. "Would you like something to eat? The coffee's fresh."

"Just coffee is fine. I seldom eat breakfast."

Erin rose and crossed to the coffeemaker. "Shame on you. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day."

Carissa smiled. "So I've heard." She looked at Quinn's empty plate and asked, "Does toast count as breakfast?"

"I had eggs too." He pointed out the telltale smear of yellow.

"Is Ian on his way or are we going to try this without him?" Carissa took the mug from Erin, the rich aroma making her mouth water.

"He's been here and gone." Erin pulled her phone out of her pocket. "I'll let him know you're finally awake."

"Finally?" She glanced around for a clock. "What time is it?"

“Nearly noon,” Quinn informed. “You needed the sleep.”

Little wonder. It had been early morning by the time they finished making love for the third time.

“How long have you been up?” She blew on her coffee, hoping her blush wasn’t obvious.

“About an hour.”

“Ian’s on his way.” Erin snapped her phone closed and slipped it back into her pocket.

Ian arrived a few minutes later, emerging from the mudroom with a cheerful smile. “The tiger cub is adorable. Have you two seen her yet?”

“The mom was so malnourished,” Erin explained. “We really didn’t expect the cub to survive. But she’s a feisty little thing. Proved us all wrong.”

“I’ll give Carissa a guided tour as soon as we finish the meld,” Quinn promised.

They congregated in the living room, returning to the positions they had taken the night before. Quinn pressed in close behind her, Ian faced her and Erin stood at her side, one hand on each of the men’s shoulders.

“I’ll take it slow.” Up close, Ian’s eyes were even more striking than she remembered. The gold slashes made the blue seem brighter. She acknowledged the unique beauty, yet her body didn’t respond to his masculine appeal. Her body, perhaps even her heart, had obviously made its choice. “Close your eyes and try to relax.”

She closed her eyes and Quinn’s arms tightened around her, allowing her to release the tension in her muscles. Their connection was stronger now. She could sense his presence clearly within her mind.

“You two have been busy.”

She heard the amusement in Ian’s voice so she didn’t take exception to the comment.

Your shields are still instinctive right now, Quinn told her. I’m going to help you make an opening for Ian.

All right. She felt a sharp sting as Quinn parted her shield then blinding light erupted behind her eyelids. Ancient and powerful, Ian flowed into her mind. She trembled. How had she kept someone this strong from doing whatever he pleased?

Ian could have forced his way in, but he didn't want to risk damaging you. Quinn answered her unspoken question. *Now don't resist his guidance, allow him to take control.*

If the directive had come from Ian, she might have balked. But Quinn trusted Ian even less than she did. The risk must be minimal or Quinn wouldn't have encouraged her. She threaded her fingers through Quinn's and gradually opened her mind.

Ian surrounded her, containing her being within his. Then he propelled them outward, beyond the room, through the house then across the yard. The sensation was so tangible, she felt as if she were flying.

"Picture Ava for me," Ian whispered, his breath stirring the hair above her temple. "Just her face. Don't place her in a setting."

Carissa formed the image of her sister, making it as detailed as possible, the tiny scar near the corner of her mouth, the stray lock of hair that continually fell across her forehead.

"Good," Ian muttered. The rushing momentum sped, carrying them farther from their bodies. In the back of her mind she saw an eagle, wings spread, eyes methodically scanning. "Don't distract me. Focus on Ava."

It was hard to control her reactions when she felt as if she were soaring across the sky. The last time she'd felt this sensation, she'd been clasped in Ian's arms as he flew her away from Quinn's cabin.

"There!" Ian channeled their combined energy downward, plummeting much faster than they had risen. "Is that her?"

A rustic living room came into view. Ava sat on a brown leather sofa, casually reading a book.

"Yes!" Excitement surged through Carissa followed immediately by knee-melting relief. Ava was unharmed. In fact she looked damn

comfortable. “Pull back. Let me see her surroundings.” Ian slowly drew backward, but the scene lost focus and faded to black. “Wait!” Carissa kept her eyes squeezed shut, but she reached out blindly for Ian’s chest. “I didn’t see where she was. I don’t recognize the room.”

After several futile moments of trying to recapture the image, Ian shook his head and sighed. “That’s the best I can do. It’s too hard to control a latent mind.”

Carissa opened her eyes, heart racing. “Can we do this again after I’ve been defined?”

He smiled and glanced at Erin. “After you’ve been defined, you probably won’t need me. Once your Therian nature has been unleashed, you should be able to sense everyone in your bloodline.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” She looked at Erin then turned to Quinn. “You need to define me now!”



Chapter Ten



Warm water cascaded over Carly, easing her muscles if not her mind. Her team had lost another shifter that morning. All their considerable knowledge and skill hadn't been enough to save the female once the deterioration began. So far Devon was the only one who had tolerated the complex at the levels necessary for mental conditioning. It was so frustrating.

Guilt made her heart twinge and she turned to face the water. When had the loss of life become nothing more than a frustration? As a child she'd take spiders outside rather than stepping on them. Even if the shifters weren't human, they were sentient beings worthy of her respect.

The shower curtain was flung open and cool air wafted over her damp skin. She screamed then anger shoved back her fear. "What the hell?" Frantically blinking the water out of her eyes, she reached down and turned off the faucets.

Osric! How had he gotten in here? "This is my *private* apartment," she sneered.

"I have a master access code. I can go anywhere I want."

She tried to reach around him and snatch a towel off the rack. He intentionally blocked her path.

With an exasperated huff, she balled her hands into fists and glared at him, refusing to let her nudity intimidate her. "Get. Out." She pointed to the door behind him.

"We need to have a little talk and the bathrooms are the only place that isn't monitored by the backers." His gaze openly assessed her naked

body, making it obvious that avoiding detection was not his only motivation.

“Give me the towel. I’m not going to stand here and drip while you lecture me.”

“Fine.” He grabbed her wrist and dragged her out of the shower stall. “You can get on your knees and—”

“You’re disgusting!” She slapped at him, twisting her arm out of his grasp.

“Exactly. You have always found me disgusting, so why the sudden change in your attitude? I’d love to think you’d just reconsidered or that rebellion had fueled your desire, but I’m not that vain. And you’re too smart for such a simple game.”

“You’re the one who loves games, not me.” She crossed her arms over her breasts, resenting even that retreat.

“Talk to me or I’m going to start touching you and there is no one here to stop me.”

Her core fluttered as she pictured herself pressed face first into the wall with Osric close behind her. His hand was between her thighs thrusting with a strong, steady rhythm.

“Is that an invitation?” Before she understood what had happened, he spun her around and shoved her against the wall. He kicked her legs apart and shoved his hand between her thighs. “Nothing but hostility comes out of your mouth, but your mind tells a different story.”

His fingers drove into her passage and Carly cried out.

“Did that hurt?” he mocked. It didn’t, but his attitude made it obvious that he wouldn’t have cared if it had. He didn’t use his other hand this time, just slid in and out of her core with his fingers.

“Why did you turn from ice princess to sex kitten in one day? What did the backers promise you?”

“I told you. They were angry because I—” His palm connected with her ass cheek and she yelped. The sting spread and sank deep into

her flesh. She gritted her teeth against the pleasure but her inner muscles compressed.

“Like that, do you?” He spanked the other side, all the while pumping between her legs. “Tell me the truth and I’ll let you come.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say. I told you what happened.”

He removed his hand and moved away, leaving her huddled against the wall. “I don’t believe you.”

“Why do you think I let you...take me? What did I gain by giving in?”

He just stared at her, gaze drilling into her eyes. Then his expression hardened even more and he moved in close again. “If I find out you’ve betrayed me, there will be nowhere for you to hide. I will find you and you will wish for death a hundred times over before I let you die.”

Fighting back her panic, she managed to produce a shaky smile. “That sounds rather dire.” She placed her hand on his arm and swayed toward him. “I’m basically a prisoner here and, as you’ve proven just now, you have access to the entire complex. How could I betray you even if I wanted to, which I don’t?”

“Information is power. Any fool knows that. Whoever controls the flow of information can change the course of the conflict.”

“What conflict? I thought we were working toward a common goal.”

He spun her back around and she heard the distinct click of his zipper. “We better be.” He nudged her legs apart again and lifted her hips toward him, effortlessly finding her entrance with his erect cock.

She closed her eyes and braced for the coming storm. He’d been aggressive before, but this time felt different. Anger and mistrust propelled each punishing thrust. He moved in her and against her without care or emotion. This was what she’d expected the first time, yet she had no idea which approach she found more arousing.



“THERE IS SOMETHING I’d like to show you before you agree to be defined.” Erin reached out and took Carissa’s hand. “It will only take a few minutes, but I think it’s important.”

Carissa took a deep breath, trying to regulate her surging emotions. Ava was safe. She wasn’t out there running from the hunters. She’d found a secure place to hide. “All right.”

Erin smiled at Quinn and said, “We’ll be right back.” Which was a polite way of telling him he wasn’t invited.

Without further explanation, Erin led Carissa through the mud-room and down the stairs. The passageway was cool and slightly eerie. Even with the overhead lights, the tunnel felt claustrophobic to Carissa.

“Isn’t the control center that way?” Carissa asked as Erin turned down a different tunnel.

“It is, but that’s not where we’re going.”

With no markings of any kind, it was a wonder anyone could find their way around in the underground labyrinth. Erin walked with purposeful strides, obviously sure of her direction. They finally came to a metal door that was secured with a palm scanner. The modern technology seemed extremely out of place in the primitive surroundings.

Erin pressed her hand to the scanner pad and a beam of light passed over her palm. The lock made a soft popping sound as it disengaged. Erin heaved the door open and motioned Carissa inside the shadowy room. Motion-activated lights illuminated the interior as she stepped across the threshold.

She took two steps into the room and stopped, paralyzed by wonder and confusion. Enclosed cabinets lined three of the walls, making the room appear more museum than bunker. Each cabinet was fitted with directional lights, showcasing its contents. A square table and two chairs arranged in the far corner were the only furniture.

“What is this place?” She walked along the shelves, admiring the eclectic assortment of artifacts. Paintings, statues, jewelry and numerous leather-bound books. “Is everything as old as it looks?”

“Yes.” Erin looked around with obvious pride but offered no further information.

“Shouldn’t these things be in a museum?”

“This is a private museum dedicated to preserving the history of the Omni Prime. I call it the vault.” She motioned Carissa toward the case on their left. “Everything is arranged chronologically and the story of each item is logged in the Historians’ journals.”

The oldest item was an exquisite gold amulet intricately inlaid with amethyst, turquoise and a reddish stone, perhaps coral or jasper. At the center was a woman seated on a throne, holding a flail and crook. To her left stood a being with the head of a cat and the body of a man. To her right stood a being part bird and part woman.

Deep inside her belly Carissa felt an odd stirring. Her fingers tingled and heat spread over her skin. “Is this Egyptian?”

“According to the journals, it belonged to Cleopatra.” Carissa snapped her gaze to Erin, expecting to see humor in the older woman’s eyes. But Erin looked entirely serious. “I had the chain carbon dated and the result supports the claim.”

“This piece alone must be worth a fortune.” The amulet seemed to pulse with energy and Carissa couldn’t drag her gaze away.

“Every piece in this room is priceless. That’s why so few are allowed to know this room exists. I’m the Historian, entrusted with the secrets of the Omni Prime.”

That caught her attention. She turned her head toward Erin and asked, “Entrusted by whom?”

“My mother.” Erin stood in the center of the room, hands buried in the pockets of her cardigan. “As the Omni Prime runs in your family, the Historian has been passed down from mother to daughter along my bloodline. My mother was a midwife and I would often help her with the deliveries. When I was fifteen, we encountered Maggie. She was quite old to have a child, so my mother was concerned that the birth would not go smoothly.”

“Wait a minute. You were fifteen when my mother was born?” She looked at Erin’s gently lined face and shook her head. “That would mean you’re pushing sixty. There’s no way you’re that old.”

“We aren’t human, Carissa. You must stop judging us by their standards.”

“You’re right.” This would be so much easier if Erin were just relaying interesting historical tidbits, but everything she said directly related to the decision facing Carissa. “Please go on.”

“Your mother was born without incident, but my mother recognized Maggie’s untapped potential. Maggie had already been defined, so the opportunity to create a true Therian was lost. Even so, my mother showed Maggie the journals and they worked together to maximize Maggie’s abilities.”

Accepting the information with a thoughtful nod, Carissa turned her attention back to the artifacts. Thousands of years of history had been encapsulated in these cases. It would be fascinating to go through the journals and read about each one, but somehow she didn’t think that’s what Erin had in mind.

“Who is that?” She pointed to the portrait of a young woman dressed in a medieval gown. Her blonde hair was mostly concealed by a veil and the pain in her deep-blue eyes made her look sad. Again Carissa felt a connection, an elemental awareness as she gazed at the painting.

“Her name was Esmee. She was forcibly defined during her first season, which left her timid and emotionally damaged.”

“But wasn’t her mother the reigning Omni Prime?” Shock ricocheted through Carissa. “How in the world would she have allowed that to happen?”

“She didn’t ‘allow’ anything to happen. This was almost a thousand years ago. People were barbaric. Esmee was captured and violated before her parents realized she was in the hands of one of their enemies.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to disrupt the story.”

“It’s upsetting. I understand how you feel. Unfortunately, the story grows even worse as it moves along. Are you sure you want to hear the rest?” Carissa nodded, so Erin continued. “Esmee became ward of the Prime Council when her parents were killed some years later. She was twenty-two, but she had yet to learn to control any of her powers. They took advantage of her weakness and imprisoned her. They were afraid to murder her outright, but they made sure she only had one child.”

“That’s horrible.” Carissa looked back at the painting and shivered. The energy emanating from this piece was different than the amulet. It was darker, quiet yet menacing. “How did they justify her captivity?”

“They claimed the death of her parents had left her touched and unbalanced. They convinced everyone it was for her own good. Then the strongest among them got her pregnant and four months after she gave birth she ‘jumped’ from the tower in which she was kept. The Historian during her time was never sure if she was overcome by their abuse or if she was pushed.”

“What did the Prime councilors hope to achieve by abusing her?”

“Power. They were tired of having their decisions questioned by a female, so they seized control. And Esmee was only the beginning of their treachery.”

“What else did they do?”

“Esmee’s daughter was raised by her father, who just happened to be a member of the Prime Council. They controlled every aspect of her life and they twisted the very nature of her existence. They told the rest of the Therian nation that the power of the Omni Prime was lost forever when Esmee took her own life. The daughter was defined during her first season as well, but they gave her a single animal nature. This muted her power and disrupted the natural order. She lived and died with no idea what she had been destined to become.”

The story was tragic. Carissa could only imagine how helpless and hopeless both women must have felt. But she couldn’t lose herself in

their sorrow. Erin was telling her these stories for a reason. “That’s why there’s no Omni Prime today.”

“Exactly. Esmee’s Historian saw the corruption of the Prime Council and knew her life was forfeit. She packed up the artifacts and the journals and went into hiding. She realized her only hope of survival was to teach her daughters in secret and wait for the right opportunity to reclaim what the Prime Council had destroyed.”

“But if Esmee was dead and her daughter’s potential destroyed, there was nothing left for the Historian to reclaim.”

“If something is meant to be, no power on earth can truly destroy it.” Erin sounded as if she believed every word. “Fate will always find a way.”

“Was Maggie the only one in recent history who has been defined with more than one animal nature?” That was the crux of the issue. Erin wanted her to attempt a multi-animal definition. The thought of transforming into any animal was terrifying, much less allowing her body to morph into an entire zoo.

Erin paused, her expression intense yet inscrutable. “The opportunity had come and gone by the time we found Maggie, but there was no doubt she was meant to be an Omni Prime.”

“Why didn’t you tell my mother all of this, give her the opportunity to fulfill her destiny?” She hadn’t meant to sound so sarcastic, but all this talk of fate was unnerving.

“I did. I brought her down here and told her everything I knew about the Omni Prime. She thought it was an amusing story but refused to believe it was real. Her attitude concerned me. The journals state that a true Omni Prime can sense the ancient energy.” Her gaze narrowed to gleaming emerald slits as she asked, “What do you feel when you look at these items?”

Carissa’s heartbeat spiked and she slowly licked her lips. “If my mother wasn’t a true Omni Prime, how can I be?”

“Your bloodline holds the potential, but the Omni Prime is a divine gift. Not everyone is capable. Not everyone is worthy.”

Energy pulsed around Carissa, making her antsy and agitated. “The Therian nation has survived for a thousand years without an Omni Prime. Why attempt this now?”

“There are rogues in any society, those who refuse to follow the rules. We have always managed them in the past, but as it did in Esmee’s era, the corruption has reached the Prime Council. If their misdeeds go unpunished this time, I’m honestly afraid our society will implode. If that happens, humans are sure to be swept into the conflict. Can you imagine the destruction that would follow in the wake of that partnership?”

Part of Carissa hoped Erin was being melodramatic. Humans didn’t need any help being destructive. “What exactly would I have to do?”

“Definition need not be a sexual act. Most Therians have forgotten that fact. Heightened emotions and intense sensations are needed to seal the bond, but that doesn’t mean you have to have sex with each participant.” Erin unlocked one of the cases and took the top book off the stack of leather-bound tomes. She placed it on the table and reverently opened the book. “Have a seat. Tell me what you see.”

Carissa slipped onto one of the chairs and turned the book toward her. The flowing script resembled calligraphy, yet she didn’t recognize any of the letters. “It’s beautiful. What language do the Historians use?”

Rather than answer, Erin carefully turned the page. Her gaze never left Carissa’s face.

Hot, tingling currents of energy swirled around Carissa’s body. The tiny hairs on her arms and the back of her neck prickled and her eyes began to burn. She rubbed her eyes, confused by the odd sensation.

“Don’t fight it.” Erin suddenly sounded very far away. “Absorb as much as you can. Let the ancients guide you.”

Mesmerized by the shimmering letters, Carissa stared at the Historian's journal. The burning in her eyes intensified and an instinct made her place her fingers on the edge of the page. The text undulated, re-arranged then stilled, settling into familiar words and phrases.

Carissa gasped and looked at Erin. "How did you do that? I can read it now."

"What does it say?"

"It's a physical description of me and Ava."

"Exactly right."

"How did you make it legible?" Carissa persisted.

"I did nothing," Erin assured with a beaming smile. "All the Omni Primes who came before you are preparing to welcome you home. Don't be afraid. They will not hurt you."

That was the only warning Carissa received. Light burst from the book, surrounding her in a warm, golden glow. She tried to draw her hands away from the fragile pages, but she couldn't move. A presence more powerful than she'd ever imagined stabbed into her mind. Images and emotions, countless lifetimes of pleasure and pain.

She rocked back in the chair then toppled sideways as the vision took control. Erin steadied her, minimizing the impact as Carissa reached the cold concrete floor. The nauseating stream of information flowing into her mind made communication impossible.

Struggling against the transfer only intensified the pain, so Carissa surrendered to the flow. She heard Erin rush to the door and panic jolted through the vision-induced haze. *Don't leave me!* The plea echoed through her mind, but never passed her lips.

"Eli, it's Erin. Call my house and tell Quinn to get his ass down to the vault as quickly as possible." After a short pause, she said, "If Quinn doesn't know the way, Ian can lead him. Just get him here!"

The images surged, eroding what was left of her rational. Erin had said this wouldn't hurt her, so why had she sounded so frantic?



QUINN RAN BEHIND IAN, heart thundering in his chest. Kyle often spoke of the mysterious vault, had even gone so far as to show Quinn the metal door. But Quinn had never been allowed inside. “Erin didn’t say what was wrong?”

“No. But Eli said it sounded urgent.”

Erin held the door open as they approached. She motioned Quinn inside, but blocked Ian’s way as he tried to enter. “I’ll catch you up once we have her stabilized,” she told Ian then left him standing in the corridor.

Not sparing Ian another thought, Quinn rushed to Carissa and knelt at her side. She was curled up on the floor, but a visual sweep didn’t identify her injury. “What did you do to her?” Accusation snapped through his tone.

“The journal describes this transfer, but neither Maggie nor Willona reacted this way to the artifacts.”

“What transfer? What’s happening to her?” He pulled her into his lap, cradling her against his chest. She looked so fragile, so helpless. Fear squeezed his chest, making it hard to breathe.

“She’s being prepared for her definition. All the wisdom of the other Omni Primes is being transferred into her mind. This is why I’ve refused to sell even one of these artifacts. She is absorbing the ancient energy.”

Quinn brushed her hair back from her pale face as he drew air into his burning lungs. Beneath her eyelids, her eyes moved quickly back and forth and her muscles twitched from time to time as if she were trapped in a nightmare.

“If the descriptions are true, she won’t be herself when she wakes up. The condition is temporary, so don’t be alarmed. She will need reassurance and...she’ll need you.” He looked up in time to see Erin’s secretive smile. “Reinforce your bond with her. She will need all your strength when she attempts the transformation.”

Erin slipped from the room, leaving him alone with Carissa.

The energy transfer went on and on. Quinn rocked her in his arms, whispering reassurances and endearments. Erin seemed excited by the development, but fear for Carissa's well-being wouldn't let him share Erin's enthusiasm.

She wouldn't be herself? What the hell did that mean? He was willing to give Carissa whatever she needed, energy, sex, his blood, his life.

The fleeting thought brought his mind screeching to a halt. Was he willing to lay down his life for a woman he hardly knew? He buried his face in her hair, surrounding himself with her unique scent. Their acquaintance might be short and intense, but he'd flowed through her mind and sensed her unguarded emotions. He knew her.

She'd trusted him with her body, her emotions and her mind. She'd believed in him while the rest of the world turned away. Yes, his soul cried out. He would lay down his life for this woman.

An especially violent shudder racked her body. She moaned and then whimpered.

Instinctively, Quinn reached for her mind, ready to supply anything she needed. Heat stabbed into his brain, driving the breath from his lungs. He gasped in a frantic breath then screamed, terrified all over again. No one could survive this intensity. No one could—

Be still. We are almost done.

Clear as a bell, the words sounded within his mind then he was thrust out of Carissa's mind. He rocked back, stunned and in awe.

This was real.

He'd grown up with Erin's fantastical stories about the omnipotent female who would restore order to the Therian nation. He knew she believed every word, but he'd always harbored doubt.

Carissa stirred in his arms. Tension flowed from her head to her toes and then released. Her eyelids fluttered as they opened and he looked into her bright-blue eyes. "Well, hello there," she murmured, a dreamy smile parted her lips. Then her head lulled back against his arm and her eyes drifted shut again.

“Carissa.” He gently shook her, unsure what to expect. Was the transfer over or had she been drawn back into the vision? “Come on, hellion. Come back to me.”

A strange vibration erupted deep in her body, building and spreading until he could feel it everywhere they touched. Her eyes flew open and Therian light blinded him. He blinked and the light receded until he met her molten-gold gaze.

“Are you all right?”

Her only response was a sexy growl. His cat barreled to the surface, more than ready to play. With firm determination, he pulled his cat back. He had to protect her, provide for her needs without losing control.

She twisted out of his arms then knelt astride his thighs, her golden gaze burning into his. “I want you inside me. Now!”

He spotted fangs as she spoke, but her features didn’t fluctuate. She was primed and ready to transform. All she needed was a template, a pattern on which to base her shift. If he offered her his blood, wouldn’t that undo everything Erin had accomplished?

Carissa wasn’t waiting for him to figure it out. She took her shirt off and threw it aside then went right for the fly of his jeans. He caught her wrists and she snarled, her head tossing, eyes wild.

“Take your pants off, love.”

His words launched her into action. She tore her shoes off with frantic determination then stood and wiggled out of her jeans. Before she could kneel again, he grabbed her hips and pulled her toward him.

He pressed his face into the juncture of her thighs and inhaled deeply. She wiggled and pulled at his fingers, but he ignored her silent struggles. The only way he would maintain control is if he took this nice and slow. He let the scent of her arousal sink into his nose, his lungs, his head. So sweet. So evocative. So...*his*. Even Erin recognized that his connection with Carissa was more than a temporary heat-induced bond. Now all he had to do was convince Carissa.

His hands squeezed her ass cheeks as his tongue began a tender exploration of her slit. The first taste of her passion sent lust spiraling through his body. His cock hardened painfully, but he refused to be rushed.

He reached for her mind, shocked again by the untamed impulses he sensed within her. She was ravenous, desperate for his seed and the stabilizing balm of his energy.

Her hands moved to his head, fingers threading through his hair. She was still tense and restless, but she allowed his mouth to have its way. He licked and gently sucked until her thighs trembled and her cream flowed freely. He wanted to lay her down and spread her thighs, so he could savor her at his leisure, but her need was too raw, her instincts too unpredictable.

Circling her clit with the tip of his tongue, he brought her right to the brink of orgasm then looked up at her and grinned.

“You’re cruel.” Her voice sounded rough and raspy, and Therian light shimmered in her eyes.

“Not true.” He unfastened his jeans and pushed them down far enough so he could free his aching cock. “For you.” He stroked the erect length from stem to tip then guided her back down over his lap.

Her legs framed his thighs as she positioned herself above him. “I need you now.”

With his hands on her hips, he drove into her snug heat. They groaned in unison as he sank deeper and deeper. “I need you always,” he countered when her face was on a level with his.

Her eyes widened then she braced herself against his shoulders and lifted, dragging herself nearly off him before sinking down again. He let her set the pace, let her control the movements.

They stared into each other’s eyes, lost to everything but the pleasure. Her head dropped back on her shoulders and she gasped in a deep breath. Her fangs were sharp and ready to pierce flesh. He had to remain alert, had to anticipate her aggression.

She hadn't removed her bra, but her lungs were strong enough to jostle her breasts. He bent to one soft mound and then the other, enjoying her silky flesh against his lips. She arched her back, moving her hands behind her so she could establish a fast, rocking motion with her hips. The new angle felt so damn good it threatened Quinn's control.

Suspecting he wouldn't last much longer, he slipped his hand between their bodies and found her clit with his middle finger. She gasped, her rhythm momentarily disrupted by the sensations his finger triggered. He was still in her mind, sharing her emotions and her pleasure.

Suddenly she lunged, mouth open wide as she went for his throat. He twisted his fist in the back of her hair and abruptly ended her advance. She cried out, tugging against his firm hold on her hair.

"No biting."

Her nails raked down his chest and she jerked her face to the side, trying to free her hair.

Seeing no other choice, he lifted her off him and turned her around, setting her down on her hands and knees. He pushed her shoulders toward the floor and drove into her from behind, covering her as his cat would cover his mate.

She tossed her head and tried to buck him off, but the scorching desire blasting across their link assured him she was testing his strength, not honestly trying to avoid him. "Be still," he commanded. "Feel me move inside you. Feel me and only me."

To his amazement, she stilled. She remained tense for a moment as he glided in and out of her wet heat then she moved her legs even farther apart and tilted her hips upward.

"Yes." He reached beneath her and fondled her breasts, loving the weighty feel of her resilient flesh against his fingers.

Her mind calmed as she focused on the steady surge of his body inside hers. He rubbed her shoulders and back, reaching down from time to time to squeeze her nipples.

“More,” she whispered. “Please, more.”

He sped his pace, moving his hands to her hips as he shuttled in and out. Her hot flesh tightened as her orgasm neared. He thrust faster and sank deeper into her mind and her body. He shared his pleasure with her and absorbed hers into himself.

Unable to resist the bliss a moment longer, he buried himself to the hilt and let go. Sensation contracted his balls and rolled along his shaft, expelling his seed deep inside her. She cried out and her inner walls rippled with telltale spasms.

He shuddered, wrapping his arms around her as she went limp beneath him. Quickly rolling them to their sides, he snuggled against her back as she floated down from the staggering pleasure.

“Let me see your eyes.” She turned her head sharply and met his gaze. Her eyes were blue again, though passion bright and slightly bloodshot. “Feel better?”

She made a sound suspiciously like a purr. “I’ve never felt better.”

He couldn’t help but smile. “We better put ourselves back together and find Erin.” He eased away from her and righted his pants. “I have no idea how long this calm will last.”



GAGE CLIMBED INTO THE cab of his truck and set down his binoculars. Something was going on at the cat sanctuary. He could almost feel the excitement, yet he had little proof. Should he wait to see what developed or alert Nehema now?

He didn’t want to tip his hand to the other Abolitionists. It wasn’t that he wished them ill—he just wasn’t willing to share the spotlight any longer. He’d been shuffled to the bottom of the deck one too many times. He wasn’t going to let it happen again.

If he waited too long one of the others might catch up to him and steal his thunder, but if he called Nehema and nothing came of his suspicions, he would look like a fool—again!

With a frustrated sigh, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. There wasn't a clear path, so he'd err on the side of caution.

Nehema picked up the call and anticipation curled his toes. Having direct access to Nehema was a privilege. He couldn't afford to misuse it.

"Tell me something I don't already know."

For a moment he thought she was talking to someone else then he realized it was a challenge, not sarcasm. "The cats are preparing for something big."

"Details, Mr. Seaton. Don't waste my time with suspicions. I need facts."

"I've watched alphas from all over the region come and go all day. And it's not just cats. I spotted a bear, several wolves and a raptor."

"Interesting lineup. What do you think it means?"

"I'm not sure, but it has to be big or they—"

"Stick with it and only call me back when you have something specific. I'll put the others on alert."

She ended the call before he could say anything else, but Gage felt somewhat vindicated. She hadn't laughed in his face and he had been the first to report the odd activities. Even if the others became involved, Nehema would know who led the charge.



Chapter Eleven



Carissa carefully ran her tongue over her newly formed fangs. “Will I always have these? People will think I’m a vampire groupie.”

Erin smiled, looking ridiculously pleased with herself. “You’re trapped mid-shift because your body isn’t sure what it’s supposed to become. As soon as your animal natures are established, you’ll be able to shift back to your original appearance.”

Animal *natures*, as in more than one. A shiver slid down Carissa’s spine, but she couldn’t tell if excitement or fear had launched the sensation. It was happening. All of Erin’s wild promises were starting to come true.

“Who has agreed to participate in the ritual?” Quinn sat beside her in the classroom above the visitors’ center in the main building of the cat sanctuary. He looked as tense as Erin was relaxed. His reticence seemed odd after the way he’d commanded her in the vault less than an hour ago.

Another shiver teased her spine, only this time she knew exactly what had caused the sensation. Each time she made love with Quinn, it was unique and wonderful. She’d been wild, driven by forces she didn’t quite understand, and still he’d known exactly how to approach her, what she needed, how to control her without compromising the trust forming between them. The longer they were together, the more she was captivated by his multifaceted personality.

“Jake’s on his way,” Erin told him. “He’ll stop by and pick up Landon. Eli, Holt and Ian are already here. And you are number six.”

It took Carissa a moment to put faces with the names Erin rattled off so casually. Jake was the tiger-biker Carissa had met while she soaked in the hot tub. Landon was the renegade wolf who had joined the rebels despite the fact that his father was a Network Prime. Holt was the bear-shifter and Eli had been manning the security station when Carissa had first arrived at the sanctuary.

“What does Eli manifest as?” Carissa asked.

“He’s a snow leopard,” Erin said. “And his cat is absolutely gorgeous.”

“So theoretically, I’ll be able to shift into a tiger, wolf, bear, raptor, jaguar and snow leopard?” It was starting to sound fantastical again.

“Theoretically, absorbing energy from six different males will allow you to shift into anything you want. For instance, Quinn can manifest as a cougar as well as a jaguar. And Ian can manifest as an assortment of birds. It might take you years to discover all the shapes at your disposal.”

“If I survive the initial transformation.”

Quinn slipped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close against his side. Warmth and encouragement flowed across their link, but she wasn’t quite ready to accept it.

Needing a moment of normality, Carissa looked around. A large oval table dominated the rectangular room. The windows were covered with colorful miniblinds and wildlife posters decorated the walls. Most pictured big cats in their natural habitats, but one featured playful babies of every imaginable variety.

“Is this room just for show or does someone hold classes here?”

Erin looked around with a smile, obviously proud of her accomplishments. “We offer private tours and educational outings. We’ve become a popular field-trip destination for the local schools.”

“And no one suspects the truth.”

“That we have more in common with our cats than most people realize?” Erin chuckled. “We have to pay the bills, and feeding all these cats is expensive.”

“What will the ritual entail?” Despite their momentary tangent, Quinn was stubbornly focused on the coming events.

“I’ll explain once the others arrive.” Erin reached across the table and gave Carissa’s hand a squeeze. “Can you tell me about the transfer? I had no idea it would be so invasive.”

“I’m still processing the images, but it was extraordinary. It was like watching a movie on fast-forward, only I was a character in the film. I felt what they felt and saw what they saw. I lived hundreds of lives in just a few minutes.”

Resounding footsteps on the wooden stairs told Carissa the others had arrived. She and Quinn had returned to Erin’s house and cleaned up before Erin brought them over to the classroom so hopefully the others wouldn’t realize how the energy transfer had affected her. She’d never felt so aggressive, so savage. She would have bitten Quinn’s neck and gleefully lapped up his blood if he hadn’t been strong enough to stop her.

You can bite me as often as you like once your definition is solidified.

Are you reading my mind? She kept forgetting that their link allowed them to speak mind to mind. She was just starting to sense his emotions, but she suspected he’d been able to sense hers as soon as he anchored the link within her mind.

He smiled and shook his head. *You blushed as you ran your tongue over your fangs. It wasn’t hard to figure out what you were thinking.*

The other five men took their places around the table, each glancing curiously at Carissa as they waited for Erin to explain.

“The first step of the ritual is a series of tests.” Erin pushed back her chair and stood at the head of the table, adding import to her words. “Carissa wasn’t even aware that she was being tested and she passed with flying colors.”

“What were the tests?” Carissa was glad she’d succeeded, but she was curious to know what she’d done.

“You could sense the ancient energy contained within the artifacts.”

“How do you know?” Jake’s emerald gaze was mildly challenging. “She could have claimed a reaction without actually feeling one.”

“She didn’t claim anything,” Erin stressed. “I watched her physical reactions as she moved about the room. Her skin flushed and she shivered. She was obviously attracted by the energy.”

“And the other tests?” Ian prompted.

“When she looked at the journal, her Therian nature stirred and allowed her to read Historian script.”

“Was Maggie able to read the language?” Carissa knew her mother had dismissed Omni Prime magic as myth, but she wasn’t sure how much of this Maggie had embraced.

“Maggie was able to read the journals. Your mother was not.”

“How else was Carissa tested?” Jake asked, drawing Carissa back to the present.

“The last one was more like a confirmation than a test. The other Omni Primes poured their energy into Carissa, filling her mind with the experiences and wisdom each accumulated over their lifetime.”

“Seriously?” Eli looked at Carissa, obviously awed by what Erin described. “You melded with your ancestors? How cool is that?”

“My mind is still buzzing with the rush of information,” Carissa said with a smile. Eli not only looked like a ski bum, his personality reinforced the impression.

Seven intense gazes settled on her face and she tensed. These people were counting on her to become some sort of savior. They were stronger, faster and more powerful than anyone she’d ever known, and yet they looked to her for... She wasn’t even sure what they expected from her.

Erin must have sensed her anxiety or read the fear in her eyes because she rounded the table and rested her warm hands on Carissa's shoulders. "We have to remember we're here to support Carissa. This is all new to her. She's only known of her Therian roots for a matter of days."

"This is the beginning," Ian agreed. "She'll need to be trained and challenged if she's to reach her full potential."

"We're all willing to help or we wouldn't be here." Holt's deep voice rumbled in the quiet room.

"What's the next step in the ritual?" Jake asked, less tolerant of chitchat than the others.

"The logistics are up to Carissa and Quinn, but her Therian nature must be drawn to the surface."

"That shouldn't be hard after the energy transfer." Carissa looked at Quinn and heat spread up her neck. "I'm still really restless."

"Good. It could be awkward for everyone if you need...stimulation." Erin squeezed her shoulders then moved away.

"I'll be happy to help if she needs 'stimulation,'" Jake offered with a sexy smile.

"Not a chance." Quinn warned him back with a hostile glare.

Erin ignored their pseudo-playful exchange and went on. "Each of you must swear to protect and support the Omni Prime in whatever way she might need. Then you offer her your blood and Carissa's instincts should do the rest."

"Sounds simple enough." The intensity in Jake's expression contradicted his blasé attitude. "Let's do this thing."

Carissa took a deep breath and released the tension gathering between her shoulder blades. What's the worst that could happen? Her Therian nature would take over and she'd jump Quinn in front of the others?

No. She could die, leaving Ava to deal with this madness alone.

She shook away the pessimism and focused on the miracles she'd already experienced today. She was surrounded by people ready and willing to protect and support her. She'd found a remarkable woman who would assist and mentor her. And then there was Quinn.

All her life, Carissa had imagined growing old with a strong, caring man at her side. Her mother had always put on a brave façade, insisting her daughters were all she needed for happiness. But as Carissa matured, she saw the loneliness in her mother's eyes and understood the sacrifices Willona had made to keep her daughters safe.

Quinn pushed back from the table and stood, holding out his hand toward Carissa. "Ready?"

"Probably not, but I doubt that will change anytime soon."

His smile was warm and gentle as he drew her to her feet and pushed both their chairs out of the way. The others quickly followed suit until they all stood around the table, alert and watchful.

Insisting she'd want to be dressed comfortably for the ritual, Erin had given Carissa a flowing summer dress to wear after she showered. She quickly realized another advantage to the garment as Quinn lifted her to sit on the table and eased her legs apart so he could stand between. The voluminous skirt covered her thighs while allowing him to move closer.

He pressed his hands against her cheeks and tilted her face up. "Look at me. Think only of me."

His mouth descended slowly, giving her plenty of time to anticipate the kiss. He loved to torture her with patience and she was quickly learning to appreciate the strategy. He pulled her flush with his body as his mouth covered hers. She wrapped her legs around his hips and parted her lips.

As soon as the others have gone, I'm going to lay you back and spread those long legs. I'm going to fuck you right here on this table.

His graphic words caught her by surprise. His kiss was gentle, completely at odds with the possessive growl in his thoughts. She responded to the kiss as the sensual promise of his words washed over her body.

Or would you like them to stay and watch?

She struggled against his hold, alarmed yet titillated by the possibility. *I want you, only you.*

And I have no intention of sharing, but I could free my cock and push inside you right now. I could make you come again and again as they feed you their blood.

She shivered so violently it tore her mouth from his. A familiar burn made her eyes sting and she turned her face to the side, panting.

“She’s ready, boys,” Erin announced. “Get moving. She won’t be manageable for long.”

Quinn knelt in front of her and wrapped his arms around her legs. Resting his chin on her knees, he looked up at her, his sexy smile promising hours of carnal pleasure.

Ian approached them first. His expression was intense and serious. He went down on one knee and said, “I willingly offer my life. We have waited so long for your return. I am honored to be part of your definition.” Then he stood and offered his wrist.

She’d expected him to cut it open or drip some of his blood into a glass. What did he want her to do? Suddenly her Therian nature surged and an elemental craving took over. She grasped his arm with both hands and brought his wrist to his mouth, biting down with wild abandon.

Ian gasped, but he couldn’t be as shocked as she was. Blood, hot and bitter, rolled across her tongue. She shuddered, fighting back a gag. Her human upbringing left her horrified by what she was doing, but the taste seemed to change or her perception of the metallic flavor morphed along with her taste buds. She felt the warmth, the concentrated energy infused in the liquid and drew strongly, wanting more.

“That’s enough, doll. Let me go.” Ian eased his arm out of her grasp and stepped back.

Power spread through her body, warming her muscles and electrifying her nerves. She felt aware as she hadn’t been moments before, alert and *hungry*.

“My life is yours,” Landon was saying. Had his eyes always been so blue? He offered his wrist and she didn’t hesitate. Her fangs sank into his flesh and hot, spicy blood filled her mouth. How had she ever thought this unpleasant? She wanted more!

Quinn had to help Landon disentangle himself from her mouth. “Careful, everyone. She’s becoming aggressive fast.”

The rest transpired in a surreal blur of surging emotions and hot, sticky blood. Each pledge made her heart beat faster and her hunger spike. She wanted to devour them, suck the energy from their blood until she burned through her body and escaped this mortal coil.

Quinn pushed her legs apart and bunched her skirt around her waist. Shocked by his actions, she glanced over her shoulder and saw seven empty chairs. A throaty laugh escaped as she realized she wouldn’t have cared. Her entire body was a blazing, aching shell of demanding need.

He tore her panties off and she raised her legs, pressing her heels against his back. His fingers tangled in her hair and he pulled her head back. “Who am I?”

“Quinn.” *My love*. She didn’t know if he’d heard the endearment, but his expression didn’t change. Her voice sounded low and needful, almost alien.

“What do you want?”

“You inside me.” She tightened her legs around him and added, “Now!”

He thrust his entire length into her aching core and she came in fast, hard spasms. Slipping his arms under her legs, he dragged her to the edge of the table then started moving. Each forceful drive rocked

her backward, but he held her legs, preventing her from sliding across the tabletop.

The rich taste of blood lingered on her tongue and she focused on his neck. She could feel his pleasure and the intensity of his desire thanks to their mental link, but it wasn't enough. She wanted to absorb him, make him part of her forever.

When his next stroke brought their bodies closer together, she grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled herself up. Anticipating her need, he turned his head to the side and gave her access to his throat.

Quinn cried out as pleasure and pain combined in a dizzying storm. Carissa's welcoming heat surrounded his shaft, caressing him as he shuttled in and out. Every time he touched her, it was dramatic and astonishing, but this surpassed everything that had gone before.

She pulled him down, making it almost impossible to move as she greedily drank her fill. Their connection grew and strengthened. He was drawn deeper into her mind with each pull of her lips.

That's enough, hellion. You don't want me to pass out on top of you.

She groaned but gradually released her hold on his flesh and withdrew her fangs.

He kissed her blood-smeared lips then pushed back so he could move again. She stared up at him, eyes wide and dazed.

You still with me?

Always. A surprising rush of tenderness accompanied the word. She raised her arms above her head and drew her legs up along his sides, her surrender unmistakable.

His heart contracted and he couldn't suppress a smile as he pumped with long, steady strokes. She was perfect, giving and warm, yet brave and fierce all at the same time.

He didn't care that she tasted like blood. He had to kiss her. Grasping her upper arms, he pulled her up and claimed her mouth. Her tongue surged past his lips, ready to tangle, ready to play.

Despite his leisurely pace, his balls drew up tight, threatening to fire. He clasped her to his chest and she wrapped her legs around his waist, stubbornly fighting off the climax.

“You were amazing,” he whispered against her mouth.

“You’re still amazing,” she countered, nipping his bottom lip.

“I’m not going to last much longer. Lie back and I’ll help you catch up.”

She laughed and squeezed him tight with her inner muscles. “I’m not lagging behind, I assure you. Three fast thrusts and I’ll come.”

“Promise?”

“Try me.”

He grasped her hips and moved fast and deep between her thighs. It took six thrusts, but they went over the edge together, clinging to each other as the pleasure took their breath away.

Reality returned to Quinn, but Carissa was still shaking. He brushed the hair back from her face and she slowly opened her eyes. Therian light blazed from between her spiky lashes. She panted, neck arching, mouth open wide.

He quickly separated their bodies and zipped up his pants. Then he scooped her up in his arms and gingerly set her on the floor. The first shift was always the hardest and she’d just ingested blood from six different men. There was no telling what her transformation would entail.

“I know you’re frightened, sweetheart, but don’t fight it. Just let it come.” His heart was beating so hard he was sure it would bruise the inside of his rib cage. *Let her be all right. Please, God, let her survive this.*

She rolled to her side and drew her legs up toward her chest. “It hurts,” she whispered, and then released a shrill scream.

Verbal communication would likely distract her, but he could not let her think he’d abandoned her. He slipped into her mind and radiated affection and calm, hoping some flash of reassurance would penetrate her fear.

The distinct snap of bones reshaping made Quinn's stomach heave. He'd gone through this countless times himself, but this was worse. He closed his eyes, unable to bear her obvious agony. Still, her screams went on and on.

He hadn't heard footsteps on the stairs, but suddenly Ian was pulling him to his feet. "Give her some room. We don't know where this is leading. She could shift into anything."

Erin was there too, her tear-bright gaze fixed on Carissa.

Therian light burst from Carissa's body, momentarily blinding Quinn. Her form grew, shredding her dress as her shape became more and more feline. Her final scream transitioned with her, ending in an unmistakable roar. The undulations were smoother now, subtler as if her body had learned the rhythm. A sleek black coat spread across her skin, signaling the end to her first transformation.

Hope hovered just out of reach as Quinn waited for her shift to stabilize. She huddled on the floor, visibly shaking, legs tucked under her feline body.

"Jaguar." Erin looked at him and smiled. "Did you have any doubt?"

"But her undercoat has stripes not spots," Ian pointed out.

"A black tiger?" Erin cautiously approached and Carissa opened her bright-blue eyes. "I don't think I've ever heard of a black tiger shifter. Even in the journals, I don't remember one being listed."

Quinn smiled and knelt beside Carissa. "She's one of a kind. Why do you sound surprised?" He held out his hand and let her sniff it before he gently stroked her head. "You're incredible, hellion. You're going to outshine us all." She rubbed her head against his hand, blue eyes bright with understanding.



"SO WHAT HAPPENS NOW?" It had taken several hours for Carissa to reverse the shift. She emerged exhausted and hungry. And naked!

Erin had casually handed her a blanket to cover up with, but Carissa had no idea where she'd gotten it. Landon had said something about Therians being used to nudity. Judging by their lack of reaction to her predicament, Carissa was inclined to believe.

Her legs were so shaky she barely made it back to Erin's house. Quinn brought her a bathrobe then she devoured one sandwich as Erin hastily made another. Quinn sat beside her at the kitchen table. He kept touching her, rubbing her back and squeezing her knee. Did he think she was going to disappear or something? Ian sat across from her, silently staring.

Carissa gulped down half a glass of milk then grumbled, "You two are acting like you've never witnessed a female's first shift."

"You shifted into a black tiger." Erin set the second sandwich down in front of Carissa then slipped onto the chair beside Ian. "That's truly remarkable."

"Why?" She picked up the second sandwich and started munching.

"Your first shift accomplished something no one else has done. You took elements from two of your guides and created something entirely new. Quinn has the recessive gene that creates black cats, but he's a jaguar not a tiger."

"So, I combined Quinn's recessive gene with Jake's tiger?"

"You created a shift never seen before," Ian told her.

"There are no Therian black tigers?"

"You're the only one." Quinn grinned, his arm resting on the back of her chair.

"If I can mix and match characteristics..."

"You can transform into almost anything," Erin confirmed.

Her shift had been basically spontaneous, triggered by a powerful orgasm. It was certainly a pleasant catalyst, but a tad impractical. It still seemed unbelievable that one day she would intentionally transition from one form into another.

Halfway through the second sandwich, Carissa's head started pounding and her eyes refused to stay open. "Just like a baby." She smiled. "Fill my stomach and I fall asleep."

"You expended a massive amount of energy. Anyone would be exhausted." Quinn moved his hand from the chair to the back of her neck and began to rub.

"That feels wonderful, but keep it up and you'll have to carry me to our room." He reluctantly stopped, and she started to push back from the table then her gaze flew to Ian. "You said I'd be able to sense Ava as soon as I was defined. How do I...flip the switch?"

He shook his head. "You need to rest. Ava looked content in her hiding place. She can wait a few more hours."

"The primary reason I did this was so I can help find her."

"We understand that," Erin said. "We want to find her as much as you do, but that doesn't change reality. If you try to track her now, you'll just be frustrated. Your energy stores need time to recharge."

She felt like a firmly wrung dishrag, so she begrudgingly relented. Quinn followed her into their bedroom and tucked her into bed. "It happened to me. I was there. So why doesn't it seem real?"

He leaned down and kissed her forehead, dark gaze caressing her face. "It will take time to adjust, but you're well on your way."

She nodded, appreciating the reassurance, even if her mind was still resisting her new reality. She was a shapeshifter. A few hours ago she'd been a black tiger!

With a heavy sigh, she rolled onto her side and tucked her hand under her cheek. It was dark again, but she had no idea if it was 8:30 p.m. or 3:00 a.m. The events she'd just lived through were monumental. It was hard to believe it had all taken place in just one day.

Every muscle in her body begged for sleep, but her mind wouldn't disengage. She saw the vault with all its priceless relics and the mysterious journal containing the history of her kind. Her kind. She smiled.

She was an Omni Prime. An untrained, fledgling Omni Prime, but she could no longer deny her calling.

The energy transfer had shown her so many things. She couldn't wait to examine them one by one. Perhaps she'd write a journal of her own, detailing what she had learned. Or were the details already recorded? She'd have to read the Historians' journals, find out how much of what she'd seen was already written down.

Go to sleep! She rolled to her back and rested her forearm across her eyes.

She'd taught herself some simple relaxation techniques after her mother died. Maybe she could coax herself into slumber if she utilized them now. She took a deep breath and pictured water flowing over her body, washing away her worry and speculation. She consciously released the tension for each individual muscle group, starting with her shoulders and working her way down.

Her mind went blank, her chaotic images receding into the depths of her memory. For one blessed moment everything was calm then a circle of light gradually expanded, bringing an image into view. Like a fancy slideshow transition, the scene overtook the blackness and then came to life.

A man in a camo jacket sat on the lowered tailgate of a truck. Beside him was an open case containing a rifle with a massive scope. His black boots were crossed at the ankle and he negligently swung his legs. He raised a pair of compact binoculars to his face and scanned from right to left. The image rotated then the perspective shifted and she was looking out through the binoculars.

He was spying on the cat sanctuary! Why would anyone do that?

The vision released as suddenly as it had started and Carissa sat up in bed. *Quinn, can you come back here please?* Clutching the sheet to her chest, she tried not to sound alarmed though her heart was beating wildly.

The door pushed inward and Quinn stuck his head into the room. "What's the matter?"

"I'm pretty sure I just saw the bastard who shot me."

He walked across the room and sat on the edge of the bed. "What are you talking about? Did you have a dream?"

"More like a vision." Had those words just come out of her mouth? She gave herself a firm mental shake. She might as well get used to it. Mystical happenings were part of her life now. "I was trying to relax and the image just took over my mind. I think he's out there right now, spying on the cat sanctuary."

"And why do you think it's the same man who shot you?"

"Because of the gun in the back of his truck." He'd just watched her undergo an ancient ritual that fundamentally altered her physiology. Why would he doubt her vision? "I don't know much about guns, but it looked like a sniper's rifle to me."

"Could you tell where he was or did you just see the sniper?" He sounded less doubtful though still a bit wary.

"I saw his truck, his gun and the binoculars he was looking through. For a second the vision shifted and I could see what he was seeing. That's how I know he was spying on the sanctuary."

"Throw on some clothes. I'll see if I can catch Ian."

She found the jeans she'd worn the day before and grabbed a t-shirt from the closet. It was much too big to be Devon's but at least it was clean.

Ian and Quinn waited for her in the living room. Both looked tense and ready for action.

"When you looked out through his eyes, describe exactly what you saw," Ian directed without pleasantries.

"I saw the cat sanctuary. Lots of fences and the round building in the middle."

"Could you see the parking lot?"

She thought for a moment then nodded. "It was on the right."

“Then he’s east of the property.” Ian scratched his chin, eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “Was there tree cover or any sort of building?”

She closed her eyes and recalled the image. As the vision rotated, she caught a glimpse of his surroundings. “He’s inside a rustic structure. Maybe a barn.”

“The old Wilson property has a dilapidated barn on it,” Erin said as she joined them in the living room. “Eli said all is quiet. Not so much as a perimeter alarm has been tripped.”

“He’s either waiting for reinforcements or he hasn’t spotted his specific target,” Quinn supposed. “I say we take him before he finds what he’s looking for.”

“I’m coming with you.” Carissa dug in her heels and prepared for his objections.



Chapter Twelve



Carly stood in front of the conference room monitors, trying to stare down the grim-faced backers. Trepidation sped her pulse and dried out her mouth. She clasped her hands behind her back to hide the way they trembled and focused on Roberto, the pirate. She had interacted with him the most and felt more comfortable with him than the general or Madam Butterfly.

“Have you been intimate with him?” Madam Butterfly asked.

Didn’t they talk to each other? Carly had given Roberto a full report of her progress earlier in the day. He’d referred to Madam Butterfly as Tias, but Carly had no idea if that was her first or last name.

“I have.” She glanced at Roberto, but like the others, he remained expressionless. “He’s starting to suspect my motivation.”

“Let him think whatever he likes,” the general dismissed. “It makes no difference to our ultimate purpose.”

Carly didn’t agree, but she knew better than to contradict a backer. If Ostric didn’t trust her, allowing him to use her body was pointless.

“If he thinks she’s working with us, he won’t tell her anything we don’t already know.” Tias made Carly’s point for her, and Carly mentally smiled.

“You lost one of the test subjects today.” Apparently unwilling to argue with Tias, the general moved on. “Do you know what happened?”

“The compound is only effective at a level that borders on toxic. Each time it starts producing results in their behavior, their bodies

rebel. Flushing the chemicals from their system is generally enough, but we weren't that lucky this time."

He accepted the explanation with a stiff nod then fell silent again.

"You better back Ostric off for a few days," Roberto told her. "Let him stew then hopefully he'll come after you."

He'd already come after her twice today. First in the steamy bathroom as she pressed up against the cool, tiled wall and later in her lab, as she worried that her coworkers would walk in and find her skirt bunched around her waist and Ostric pumping into her from behind. He always took her from behind, as if her face disgusted him. Or he was thinking about someone else...

"Is there something particular you'd like to know?" she asked. "It might be easier if I knew where to steer our conversations."

"We need to understand his obsession with the Seymour sisters. At first we thought it was the likelihood that he's their father, but we've since learned that one of the young women was fathered by a wolf-shifter. We're relatively sure he's aware of this fact and yet he is equally interested in both."

"I'll see what I can find out."

"Don't push too hard," Tias advised. "We're in this for the long run and we don't want him to shut down."

"I understand."

"Good. Then carry on," Roberto said. "And reformulate the compound. We cannot afford to lose any more cats."



QUINN LOOKED AT CARISSA'S stubborn profile and slowly shook his head. "There is no way you're coming with us."

"How will you know if you've got the right guy?"

"Truck, binoculars and a sniper rifle. I'm pretty sure there won't be more than one."

"I'll take a pass over the area from the air, see if I can pinpoint his location." Ian grinned at Quinn. "You two fight it out while I'm gone." He headed out through the back door, shedding his clothes as he went.

Quinn closed the distance between him and Carissa and framed her face with his hands. "You're exhausted and you've just come into your power. You need to learn how to control it. Let me do my job."

"There will come a day when I'll fight at your side." She made it sound like a vow.

"Probably a whole hell of a lot sooner than I'd like." He kissed her gently then wrapped his arms around her.

"If you're not back in half an hour, I'm coming after you."

"I like it better when you come before me, or when we come at the same time."

She slapped his arm and wiggled out of his embrace. "What will you do with him once you've caught him?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"If he really is the bastard who shot you, he's a dead man."

Ian returned before she could respond. Luckily he'd paused long enough to pull on his jeans. "That was easy. He's right where we figured, the abandoned barn on old man Wilson's property."

"We'll be back before you miss us," Quinn promised.

"Too late." She smiled. "I miss you already."

Quinn walked out on to the back porch with Ian. The night was cool and clear, stars stretched for as far as the eye could see.

"She's going to keep you hopping," Ian predicted. "I think I'm glad she picked you."

"I know I'm glad she picked me." He fought back a happy grin and focused on the task at hand. "How do you want to do this? At least one of us should probably drive so we have some way of getting him back here once we've secured him."

"I'd always rather fly."

“Can’t say I blame you. Fly in and distract him and I’ll sneak up from behind. Just don’t get yourself shot.”

Ian chuckled. “Sounds almost like you care.”

“Erin would miss you if you got shot, and she’s got enough to deal with right now.”

“That’s more like it.” Ian laughed.

“I’ll bring your pants.”

“Good. Don’t want him to misunderstand the handcuffs.” Ian shifted right out of his jeans and took to the air.

Quinn watched him disappear into the darkness then realized his truck was at the cat sanctuary. “Shit!” He snatched Ian’s jeans off the concrete, noting the telltale weight in the back pocket. He hadn’t been kidding about the handcuffs. Quinn ran back inside the house. “Erin, can I borrow your keys. Ian just took off and my truck is—”

“SUV’s in the garage. Keys are in the ignition,” she called from the living room. “Bad habit, I know.”

“Got a gun?” He was humiliated to ask. Everything he needed was in his truck, but his truck was parked outside the sanctuary.

“Under the seat and it’s loaded, so be careful.”

He rushed into the garage and dug the gun out from under the seat. “Nothing like being prepared.” If Ian weren’t flying into danger, this would have been funny.

He climbed into her SUV and jerked the mirrors into alignment. Then he paused to check out the gun as the garage door slowly opened. Springfield XD, .9mm. Not bad. The engine turned over with a roar and he backed out of the garage.

Old man Wilson had still been alive when Quinn lived with Erin, so he knew the barn Ian had mentioned. The main access road approached from the front, but there was also a narrow maintenance road dissecting the fields that would bring him out behind the barn. The fields were overgrown, the road barely discernable. Thank God Erin drove a SUV.

He cut the lights and tried to keep the engine at a steady drone. Hopefully Ian realized it would take him longer to arrive by truck than an eagle could fly. When the barn came into view, he cut the engine entirely and rolled to the edge of the barnyard. He turned the dome light off, grabbed the gun with one hand, Ian's jeans with the other, then eased the door open.

Activating his feline vision often made his eyes glow, so he didn't risk it as he crept toward the back of the dilapidated barn. An eagle's sharp cry split the night and spurred Quinn into motion. He ran for the barn and ducked through the doorless threshold.

The human stood several paces from his truck, arms folded over his head, shoulders slumped protectively as Ian swooped and slashed at the man's back, arms and shoulders.

Quinn whistled and tossed the jeans off to one side, making sure Ian saw him do it. "Drop to your knees and I'll call him off."

"This fucking bird is yours?" The man's voice sounded shrill, panicked. "You're in for one hell of a lawsuit!"

"You're on private property, asshole. I can shoot you where you stand."

The man turned and sneaked a peek at Quinn from between his folded arms. "Call it off."

"Get on your knees and lock your hands behind your head."

After another hesitation, the man obeyed.

Ian flapped his wings, shooting into the shadows at the far end of the barn. It was Quinn's turn to distract their prisoner.

With the .9mm clasped between his hands, he worked his way around until he faced the man. "What are you doing here?"

"I just needed somewhere to crash for the night. Thought the place was deserted."

"This a little off the beaten path. Odd place for a homeless man."

The stranger glared up at him. "I never said I was homeless. Just didn't think anyone would care."

Ian walked out of the darkness, holding his handcuffs and wearing his jeans. “Cry me a river.” He snapped the cuffs onto one wrist then brought both arms down and behind the stranger’s back before securing the other side.

“Where did you come from?” He craned his neck, trying to get a better look.

“Don’t worry about him. I’m the one with the gun,” Quinn reminded.

“Yeah, he attacks with talons. Doesn’t he?” Belligerence lit the stranger’s eyes as he revealed that he knew what they were. Or at least what Ian was.

“Now that was really stupid.” With one arm, Ian hauled the smaller man to his feet. “You see, we kill anyone who learns our secret. We weren’t sure if you were a threat or just someone in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“I know exactly what you are and the rest of my team is on their way. If I disappear, they’ll burn this place to the ground.”

Quinn motioned to the barn surrounding them. “Not much of a loss.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“I’ll tell you what I know.” Quinn moved closer and Ian tightened his hold. “You’ve got a rifle in the back of that truck with my mate’s blood on it.”

All the fight seemed to melt from their captive. “You bonded with Carissa? Has she...given in to her demon nature?”

“You say her name as if you know her.” Quinn ignored the insult. Members of the Abolition were brainwashed into believing what their leaders wanted them to believe.

“Take me to her. She deserves to know that there are other choices for her life.”

“Choices like those you provided for Willona, perhaps?”

“Have her meet us in the classroom,” Ian cautioned. “This piece of shit isn’t getting a guided tour.”

Quinn reached for Carissa across their private link and felt her relief rush over him. *I’m fine, hellion. The shooter is contained, but he’d like to speak with you. Meet us in the classroom.*

Why does he want to talk to me?

I’ll explain when we arrive. Or she would recognize the shooter’s face and her memory would fill in the blanks. If this weren’t an opportunity to help Carissa understand her mother better, Quinn wouldn’t have indulged the shooter’s request. But Carissa was so conflicted about her past. He wanted to give her every piece of information he could find.

Ian dragged the human into the back of his truck then closed up the rifle’s case and handed it to Quinn. “Drive us over to the sanctuary. I’ll come back for the SUV once we’ve figured out what to do with him.”

The keys were in the ignition, so Quinn fired up the truck and drove it to the parking lot beside the cat sanctuary. Ian hauled the human out of the back of the truck and Quinn slammed the tailgate. Erin and Carissa were waiting in the classroom, along with Holt and a guard Quinn didn’t recognize. Holt and the guard stood on the outside of the open doorway, alert but unobtrusive.

“So what’s this about?” Erin asked, her gaze hot and hostile upon their captive.

Carissa turned her head this way and that, eyes narrowed yet bright. “I know you,” she whispered. “Why does your face look so familiar?”

Carissa pressed her hand over her thudding heart as she waited for the man to speak. His coat was shredded, flesh bared and bloodied in numerous places. She looked at Ian and whispered, “Did you do that to him?”

He looked at his fingernails and shook his head. "I had a manicure on Tuesday."

"Is this the man who shot you?" Quinn asked.

She started to say it was then realized she really didn't know that for a fact. "I saw him with a sniper's rifle, but I can't be sure he was the one who fired it at me."

"I don't think he fired it at you," Quinn said. "I think he fired it at Ian and you got in the way."

"Then I can finish what I started in the barn?" Ian's grin was nothing short of bloodthirsty.

"Not yet." Erin placed her hand on his bare chest, stopping his advance toward the human. "He was brought here for a reason." She looked at Quinn and asked, "Does he have information you'd like to explore before our friend rips him to ribbons?"

"I suspect he has all sorts of information worth exploring, but I'm only interested in what he knows about my mate," Quinn clarified.

"I would never harm Carissa intentionally. I was like a father to those girls."

Carissa looked at the stranger as she searched her memory. He was so much older than she remembered, but then so was she. "Is your name Gary or—"

"Gage." He licked his lips and met her gaze for the first time. "I helped your mother escape these monsters and I can help you."

"Help me escape my mate or help me escape myself? What do you presume I want to escape?"

Tears gathered in his eyes and he shook his head. "I found you too late." Then his head came up and he blinked back the tears. "What about your sister? Has Ava been defiled?"

Carissa tensed, hands clenching at her sides. "I'd choose my words more carefully. I find your attitude insulting."

"I only want what's best for you."

He sounded so sincere she almost wanted to believe him. The tragic thing was he obviously believed every word. “Good. Then answer a few questions.”

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

“Did my mother contact you or did you go after her?”

He licked his lips and glanced at Quinn. “I’m not sure. We noticed each other about the same time.”

He sounded far less believable now. “Look at me. My mate will not hurt you until I lose interest in you.” Gage turned his head and missed Quinn’s challenging look. He’d destroy Gage without a thought if he attempted to hurt her again. “Did you require my mother to submit to sterilization?”

“They are not my rules. But she was not forced to do anything. She made her own decisions every step of the way.”

She wanted to slap him or shake him and force him to see the lives his rescues ruined. “How many have you ‘rescued’ since then?”

“I don’t know.”

“Ten, a couple of hundred? Give me a range.”

He pressed his lips together and his face fell into an expressionless mask. “I’m sorry they corrupted you before I could succeed. I will always remember you as an innocent child.” Then he looked away and refused to acknowledge her existence.

Quinn was beside her in an instant, drawing her away from the pain. “Let them handle this. You’ve done more than enough already.”

“So, asswipe, convince me to keep you alive,” Ian said as Quinn led her from the room.

At the bottom of the stairs she stopped and glanced over her shoulder. “What will happen to him once Ian finishes toying with him?”

“That’s up to the Alpha Council.”

“But Gage isn’t Therian. Shouldn’t he be turned over to human authorities?”

“As soon as he started screwing with our people, he became part of our world.”

And Therian justice was swift and decisive. She shouldn't care what happened to him. If it weren't for Gage, her life would have been very different. But she couldn't help feeling as if she'd betrayed a childhood friend.

“Am I going to have to tie you to the bed before you rest?” Quinn asked as they reached the tunnels.

She grinned and took his hand. “How about if you tie me to the bed and I'll rest after you're finished with me?”

He stopped walking and looked into her eyes. “Does the idea excite you?”

She shrugged and averted her gaze. “Domineering men always pissed me off until I met you.”

With a little growl, his fingers tightened around hers and he started walking again. The pace was noticeably faster as they resumed their trek toward Erin's house. Carissa fought back a smile, not wanting him to realize how delightful she found his changeable moods or how easily she could arouse him.

He kicked the door shut behind them and scooped her up in his arms. “I keep waiting for this fire to burn itself out, but it just grows hotter and hotter.”

“Do you want it to burn out?”

He lowered her to the bed and whipped off her shoes. His haste thrilled her and her body echoed his enthusiasm. They'd already made love twice today, why was the craving still so strong?

Standing long enough to tear his shirt off over his head and struggle out of his jeans, he returned to the bed naked and ready to conquer.

She ran her gaze from his head to his toes, admiring his sculpted body and all the leashed power awaiting her, but it was his eyes that captivated her most, so dark and soulful. She raised her arms and he

pulled her shirt off, tossing it toward his. Her breasts swayed unhampered by a bra.

He noticed the lack of underwear and grinned. "Are you commando all the way?"

Lying back as he unzipped her jeans, she soon revealed the full scope of her naughtiness. "Unplanned trips make things complicated. I didn't see any boxers when you pulled off those jeans."

He peeled her borrowed jeans down along her thighs then tossed them off the bed. "I never wear underwear. When I'm alone, I seldom wear clothes."

"We'll never get anything accomplished if you walk around naked all the time."

"Depends how you define accomplishments." He bent to her breast and drew her nipple deep into his mouth. The firm suction sent ribbons of sensation curving through her torso and into her abdomen.

She pushed her fingers into his hair, sighing as the silky strands caressed her fingers. She would never tire of his lips sliding over her skin or the wet suction of his mouth. His entire body was hard against hers except for those talented lips.

She closed her eyes and saw their link for the first time. It arched between them, an iridescent band, shimmering and shifting as their emotions changed. *Can you see it too? Has it always been so beautiful?*

He lifted his head and smiled into her eyes. "When you're pissed off or afraid, it looks more like a storm cloud than a rainbow."

"Have you always been able to see it?"

"At first it was hardly visible. Like one single strand of a spider's web."

She hesitated, not sure how to ask the next question without making it sound like an accusation.

He chuckled. "Just spit it out. I only bite when you want me to."

"You've referred to me as your mate."

"So have you," he reminded.

“I think the others expect you to claim me, but has it happened yet?”

He threw back his head and laughed. “It couldn’t have been a very strong bonding if you don’t remember it happening.”

“So much has happened and I wasn’t in control for most of it.”

“When we bond, you will be aware of every kiss and caress. When we’re ready for our souls to join, it will eclipse everything you’ve experienced before.”

“How will we know when we’re ready?”

“I’m not going to rush you. You’ve been thrust into a world you knew nothing about and you deserve plenty of time to adjust to the changes.”

“That makes it sound like you’re waiting on me. Are you ready now?”

He cupped her chin and brushed his lips over hers. “I know the difference between love and lust. I can feel how vastly different this is from anyone I’ve ever touched. I’m convinced you’re my mate, but I want you to be sure.” She started to reply, but he placed his fingers against her lips. “Wait until your life has settled into a routine and you have learned to control your powers. If our feelings for each other haven’t changed, we’ll move forward with a soul bonding.”

She knew he was right. It was the sensible choice, the responsible choice. But her heart hungered for him, longed to feel their beings entwined eternally.

He slipped his arm under her neck and covered her mouth with his. As always, the kiss was slow and deep, exasperatingly patient. She tangled her fingers in his hair and tried to take control. He chuckled against her moist lips and moved over her, nudging her legs apart with his knees.

Devilment gleamed in his eyes as he drew her arms down and slipped his arms under her bottom. His hands closed around her wrists

and with one firm tug he had her hands pressed against the small of her back and her ass rested on his forearms.

“What are you doing?”

“Who needs rope when it’s more fun just to hold you in whatever position I choose?” He angled her pelvis up and lowered his head between her thighs.

She tugged against his hands just to see if he could hold her. His fingers felt like steel bands, inflexible yet exerting only as much pressure as necessary to restrain her. A thrill bore deeper into her soul as her helplessness sank in. He was far stronger than she, able to do whatever he wanted. And what he wanted was to make her drunk with pleasure.

His tongue teased her cleft, lightly stroking her folds without touching her sensitive clit. She wiggled, trying to guide his tongue where she wanted it, which only made him more determined to avoid the spot.

“Put your legs over my shoulders and I’ll give you what you want.”

Beyond caring if she were bowing to his demands, she instantly obeyed. His warm lips pressed against her sex and his tongue slowly delved between her folds. She held perfectly still, waiting for the first caress to send her senses soaring. He circled her slowly, drawing tension into her pelvis as his tongue swirled round and round.

“Oh.” She gasped, arching into the tantalizing touch. “Faster. Please.”

He ignored her, continuing the mesmerizing rhythm. Her belly quivered and her core clenched as the coil drew tighter and tighter. She trembled, hovering on the brink. Then he surrounded her clit with his lips and sucked. The firm pull of his mouth drew the sensations to the point of contact and when he let go, the pleasure burst and she came in shuddering spasms.

With her legs still draped over his shoulders he lifted her and found her opening with his cock. Her wrists were still firmly contained with-

in his hands as he pushed into her trembling body. She opened for him, surrounding him with heat and liquid welcome.

He wasn't gentle and she savored every forceful stroke. This was Quinn at his best, aggressively tender, ruthless in his pursuit of their pleasure.

Just when she'd adjusted to the demanding position, he released her hands and dragged his arms out from under her. She moved her arms to a more comfortable position as her legs slid off his shoulders. He twined his fingers through hers and pinned her hands to the bed on either side of her head. Then he started moving again.

Her heart swelled with wonder. Even in the throes of passion he worried about her comfort, tried to balance her willingness to please him with her fragility.

In response to his selflessness, she arched into each stroke, taking him deeper and increasing the impact as their bodies met. He moaned, and joy rippled across their link, which was already seething with the intensity of their combined passion.

She drew her legs up high against his sides as his tempo sped. His gaze drilled into hers, hot and demanding just like his cock. "I love you." The words seemed ripped from his very soul and time itself seemed to pause and listen for her reply.

"I love you too."

He closed his eyes but relief and contentment surged into her mind. How could he doubt her devotion? Couldn't he feel her emotions as she was feeling his?

She dragged her hands out from under his and took his face between her hands. "Look at me."

His eyes opened, but his hips kept up the steady slide between her thighs.

"Say my name," she demanded.

He smiled and whispered, "Carissa, my love. My life."

"And who are you?"

His brows rose and his instantaneous insecurity vanished. "Your lord and master?"

"In your dreams!"

His lips sealed over hers and words were forgotten as the pleasure crested. He drove his entire length into her heat and they clung together as they came. "So damn good," he whispered against her damp lips.

She pushed him back and looked deeply into his eyes. "I love you. I'm going to keep saying it until you believe me."

He kissed her then said, "What if that takes the rest of our lives?"

"Fine by me."

They reluctantly separated and she settled against his side as he sprawled on his back. His arm loosely circled her back and she rested her head on his shoulder. Content and sleepy.

If only she knew where Ava was this moment would be perfect.

An image popped into her mind and she tensed.

"You okay?"

She squeezed his shoulder to let him know she was fine but poured energy into the unexpected vision. The cozy living room was the same one she'd seen when Ian had guided the vision, but Ava was no longer curled up on the couch. When she'd tried to expand the scene before, she'd lost the image completely. Still she had to try. Slowly, she pulled back and the vision responded. She could see a narrow hall and a shadowed bedroom. And Ava sound asleep in the bed.

Light from the hallway gleamed on the distinctive brass headboard and the familiar landscape that hung above the bed. She knew this bedroom, saw it every day in her store.

"Oh my God." She released the vision and sat up, heart thudding out her excitement. "I know where Ave is."

"Just like that?" He sounded a bit doubtful, but he was smiling.

"I was thinking how this moment would be perfect if only I knew where Ava was and her image popped back into my mind."

"But you could tell where she was this time?"

“Yes!” She grinned from ear to ear.

He laughed. “Well, where the hell is she?”

She bent her knee and turned to face him, so excited she could barely speak. “I thought about our employees, but I’d forgotten about our partners.”

“Okay, you lost me.”

“Our rental shop partners with the guys out at Pine Valley Ranch. Like the brochure I gave you the first time we met. This is so obvious. I can’t believe I didn’t think about it sooner. They have rental cabins. She’s tucked away in one of them.”

“In a rental cabin at Pine Valley Ranch. Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Positive.”

He climbed out of bed and dug his phone out of the pocket of his jeans. “I sent Kyle the location. He’ll probably have her here for breakfast.”

Her heart gave another happy leap and her cheeks hurt from her continual grin. “I hope so. I’ve been so worried about her and there is so much I want to tell her!”

He laughed as he climbed back into bed. “You’re all wound up again. Do we need to start all over?”

“You make that sound like a threat.” She snuggled back into the warmth of his body and closed her eyes. “I love you,” she whispered.

He pinched her bottom as he replied, “I love you too.”

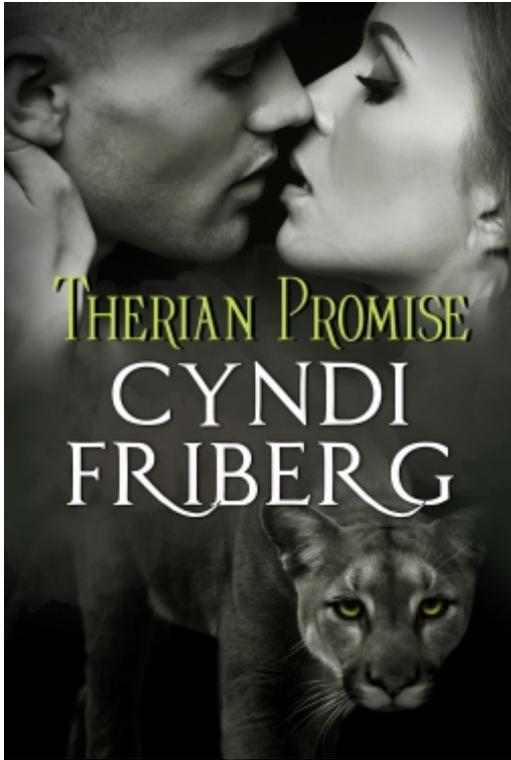
His scent surrounded her and her soul was at peace. Within seconds she was sound asleep.

THE END

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Thanks, Cyndi



THERIAN HEAT, BOOK Three: Kyle is the youngest feline-shifter ever to sit on the Prime council and he's determined to prove himself worthy of the honor. A latent female with unbelievable potential has been identified by the wolves, so Kyle sets out to find her before his enemies make her one of them.

Terrified and alone, Ava manages to stay one step ahead of her pursuers until a disturbing vision leaves her weak and confused. She steps out into the cool mountain morning and a gorgeous stranger pulls her into his arms.

From the moment they first touch, passion erupts between the unsuspecting couple. Kyle is attracted to Ava's quick wit and feisty spirit while his cat wants to touch her, taste her and make her scream with

pleasure. Trust doesn't come easily for Ava. Her past has taught her to be wary, but she senses a soul-deep connection with Kyle. Each secret they unearth reveals a more challenging conflict, yet together they can face any enemy.

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