

Alpha Colony 1: Untamed Hunger
Cyndi Friberg

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Cyndi Friberg

Praise for shifter books by Cyndi Friberg

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“Entertaining, adventurous and passionate.”

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Therian Prey

“Top Pick! I love the series and I was just as enthralled by this instalment.”

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Therian Promise

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Therian Prize

“Top Pick! The chemistry is scorching....it just keeps getting better and better.”

~Night Owl Reviews

Alpha Colony 1: Untamed Hunger

Cyndi Friberg¹

Major Sasha Young has been stationed at Alpha Colony for the past three years, part of an elite military team assigned to maintain order and resolve conflicts between the shapeshifters. She has watched the hostile “morphs”, secretly fascinated by their predatory grace and animal magnetism. The colonies were established to protect defenseless humans from these genetic anomalies. So why does she feel like the morphs are the ones being victimized?

Grant Evans, a rare white-tiger shifter, is frustrated and appalled by how little their human keepers understand the average “morph.” After an especially violent altercation between leopard and tiger shifters, he decides it’s time to educate them. He’s had his eye on Sasha ever since she arrived, and introducing the feisty beauty to the full potential of a felidae-morph is going to be his pleasure—and hers.

1. <http://www.cyndifriberg.com/>

Chapter One

A shrill scream rang out through the crisp autumn night. Sasha jerked her head toward the sound and activated night vision with a precise mental command. Leaves rustled in the breeze and a menu appeared on the right side of her visor: thermo imager, topographical map, data search, com-center. Disregarding each function for the moment, she peered into the darkness, searching the forest for anything out of the ordinary. Nothing moved. Nothing explained the sound.

“Should we check it out?” Eric stepped up beside her, pulse rifle positioned against his shoulder. Dressed in protective gear similar to hers, the youngest member of her team seemed eager for action.

She hesitated, continuing her visual search. “We only interfere as a last resort. Their mating rituals can seem savage if you’ve never seen them before.” Another scream changed her mind. “That didn’t sound playful. Come on.”

They left the path they’d been patrolling and headed deeper into the trees. Leaves crunched under her boots, and snapping twigs echoed through the unnatural stillness. Something was definitely wrong.

Shutting down night vision, she activated her suit’s illumination. Eric quickly did the same. Often their approach was enough to break up an altercation. The morphs had their own system of justice and the Department of Morphological Affairs, or DOMA, allowed them to resolve their own conflicts as often as possible.

A feline growl guided her toward the disruption. The responding roar was deeper and louder, a different breed of cat.

Director Darman and his cronies could identify the breeds by sound. She was still struggling to sort them out by sight.

They emerged in a clearing, and Sasha shot three pulses into the air. “Break it up!”

Tigers and jaguars wrestled in a twisting mass of stripes and spots. Eric flanked her, rifle aimed at the center of the brawl. Blood scented the air, acrid and unmistakable even to her human nose. Beyond the combatants stood a scattering of morphs in human form. Their eyes gleamed in the darkness and excitement twisted their features.

Sasha discharged her rifle again. “Stand down or I’ll dispatch a riot squad!”

A pale blur drew her attention to the trees. Leaping between two of the spectators, a massive white tiger bounded into the clearing. Grant. Her pulse kicked up a notch and unwanted flutters erupted in her belly. She’d only seen him in cat form once before, but he was the only white tiger in the colony.

He announced his presence with a savage roar. The combatants paused, glancing toward the new threat. Grant growled, teeth bared, then let out another roar.

Cats scattered and observers melted into the shadows, until only three cats remained. A large orange faced off with the white over the motionless body of a jaguar. The tigers circled, heads down, exchanging growls in a menacing language that required no translation.

The jaguar transitioned into human form as the morph lost consciousness. Shock sent chills down Sasha’s spine. The jaguar was female. She lay on her side, torso rotated toward the ground. Claw marks furrowed her back and her shoulder was obviously dislocated. Her thighs were smeared with blood.

That son of a bitch! Transformation repaired all but the most severe wounds. This woman was in serious trouble.

Sasha activated her com-link and triggered an emergency beacon that would dispatch backup to their location. "Medic to sector five. Jaguar female, condition red."

Grant leapt over the female and caught the other tiger by the throat. Shit! Strangulation was a tiger's favorite tactic, their chosen means to kill.

"Grant, stand down!" She had to cut through his bloodlust. If he killed, even in retaliation, she'd be forced to shoot. Feral cats must be put down. There was no exception to the rule.

Tearing off her helmet, she moved closer and shot into the ground. His pale gaze connected with hers and she tried again. "Let go. I've got this."

An endless moment passed; then she heard the orange cat growl. It required air to make the sound. Grant must have loosened his grip.

To her astonishment, Grant released his hold and head-butted his opponent in the shoulder. Now that wasn't a typical tiger move. With a parting growl the orange turned and shot off into the forest.

Grant swung his head toward her, eyes glowing for a moment as they caught the light coming off her suit. He crouched, a low sound rumbling in the back of his throat.

She needed names, and an explanation of what had triggered this brawl. Would he transform so she could talk to him? His subtle hints and tidbits of information had proved invaluable down through the years. He had no interest in being an ac-

tual informant, but he'd always been willing to cooperate with her investigations.

The other cats appeared to have retreated into the trees, but she sensed them, waiting beyond the circle of light. She couldn't put him on the spot, wouldn't endanger his standing with the others.

As she knew he would, Grant turned and darted into the darkness.

"Stay here until the medics arrive," she told Eric. "I'm going to see if anyone will talk to me."

Eric motioned toward the unconscious female. "Was she the reason for the fight or did she just get in the way?"

"That's what I hope to find out."

Flipping his rifle around, he thrust it through the loops on his back as he moved closer to the victim. "Major, with all due respect, I think it would be wiser if you waited for backup. You shouldn't be out there alone. It's too dangerous."

"They trust me." Sasha stowed her rifle as Eric had done and picked up her helmet. She appreciated Eric's concern, but she'd been stationed at Alpha Colony long enough to know how things worked. Cats didn't attack humans without provocation, and she had no intention of provoking them. "I've worked hard to make sure they don't perceive me as a threat."

Eric made a sound suspiciously like a snort. "They don't perceive you as a threat because you're not one. Any of them could rip out your throat before you squeezed the trigger."

"And they'd pay for their actions with their life."

"You'd still be dead."

Compassion warmed his tone, so she didn't take offense. "It's my job to investigate, to prevent situations from escalating.

This has potential explosion written all over it. The longer I wait, the less chance I have of finding out what this was about. I'll meet you back at base." She motioned toward the female with her helmet. "Guard the girl."

"Yes, ma'am." The tension in his response accentuated his objection. Even so, he moved into position as Sasha took off in the general direction of Grant's departure. She didn't want to be too obvious. Still, she didn't want Grant to get away.

Dreading the result, Sasha deactivated her suit's illumination. The night closed in around her for a moment before her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Her helmet's night vision would make her job easier, but Grant wouldn't approach if he couldn't see her face. Everyone looked the same behind their visors.

She moved deeper into the forest, each step careful and quiet. Would he accept her silent invitation? A sudden jolt of fear clenched her stomach and sped her pulse. What if someone else accepted instead?

Grant wouldn't hurt her. He might not tell her what she wanted to know, but she'd be safe with him. She couldn't say the same about many of the other cats. Especially the aggressive orange Grant had challenged.

Her steps faltered as she reconsidered her strategy. Maybe Eric was right. This was dangerous. Daylight wouldn't make the situation less risky. Most cats preferred seclusion regardless of the time of day. But another person would... end any hope she had of finding someone who'd actually talk to her.

Strong fingers closed around her upper arm, and she was yanked into a dense cluster of trees. A large hand covered her mouth, muffling her startled gasp. Even in the moonlight, Grant's pale blond hair was unmistakable. She exhaled, tilted

her head, and stared up into his shimmering eyes. The night concealed their color, but she knew they were powder blue.

His head lowered, and he inhaled deeply as he urged her back against a tree. Holding her in place with the press of his body, he knocked her helmet to the ground and jerked her rifle out of its holder, tossing it a short distance away. Awareness arced between them, hot and electric.

“Eric’s right.” His breath caressed her lips, warm and inviting. “You shouldn’t be out here alone.”

“I’m not alone.” He’d never touched her before. Their gazes had locked countless times, each knowing what the other was thinking, imagining. Still, he’d always kept his distance, always remained professional. “We need to talk.”

“You might need to talk. I need... to be inside you.” Even through her protective suit his erection was obvious. He was naked and fully aroused. He needed release from the bloodlust humming through his system.

His fingers pushed into the hair at the base of her neck. His thumb stroked across her cheek as he stared into her eyes. A moment’s pause was all the warning she got before he pounced. Then his lips ravished hers with ruthless purpose and unquestionable skill. His tongue teased and soothed, easing his way deeper with such tender care that she didn’t realize she was being claimed until he thrust in and out of her mouth, an unmistakable parody of sex.

She had to stop him, unless she wanted to wrap her legs around his waist and take him deep into her body. Excitement tingled down her spine and gathered between her legs, a teasing foreshadowing of the pleasure to come.

“Will I be your first morph?” He used her braid to urge her head back, then nibbled his way from her chin to her earlobe.

“You say that as if it’s a foregone conclusion.” She panted, unable to steady her breathing or stop her hips from grinding against his hard body. “Maybe I don’t want to have sex with you.”

His free hand skimmed over her breast, his thumb effortlessly finding her nipple. “How often do you come with my image in your mind? I think of you so often it feels like we’ve been lovers for years.”

No matter how much she wanted him, sexual interaction with morphs was strictly prohibited. In fact it could be dangerous. The semen of some morphs was highly toxic to humans. “Grant, this isn’t going to happen. Back off.”

She kept her hands fisted at her side, refusing to touch him. His sculpted body was a blur in the darkness. Thank God. If he looked half as good as he felt pressed against her, she might damn the consequences and play out her fantasies.

His lips returned to her mouth, hovering and teasing. “So we won’t have sex. Just touch me and let me touch you.”

He reached for the clasp at the top of her suit, and she caught his wrist with both hands. “I can’t. You know I can’t.”

Moving his hands to the tree above her head, he closed his eyes while his chest heaved. “I’m not sure I can talk myself down. I’m... crawling out of my skin.”

Of course he was. The fight had been interrupted. He was locked in the throes of bloodlust.

A wicked idea took root in her mind. Perhaps she could indulge herself just a little, while helping him out of his predicament. “Turn around.” His eyes opened. His gaze bored into

hers for a long moment before he pushed off the tree and complied. She pressed her hands against his back, feeling his muscles flex beneath her palms. "I'll touch you while you... relieve the pressure."

His breath escaped in a ragged hiss as her hands began to stroke. She explored his wide shoulders and combed his long hair with her fingers. He shifted restlessly, his body swaying as her hands swept up and down his sides.

Desire flowed through her, hot and heavy, pulsing between her thighs. She had dreamed of touching him for so long, imagined all the ways they could pleasure each other. His skin was amazingly warm given the coolness of the night. She rubbed her breasts against his back, wishing she were naked too, wanting nothing between his flesh and hers.

She pushed her hands down the fronts of his thighs as his hips began a subtle rocking. He was touching himself as she'd suggested, driving himself toward release.

Her lips settled against his spine, her tongue slowly tasting. Salty, warm, wild, his taste was everything she'd imagined and more. She wanted to kiss her way around and kneel before him, learn how the rest of him tasted. But she couldn't. It was far too dangerous.

With a throaty moan, he guided her hand to his cock, curving her fingers against the shaft. She muffled her gasp against his back, wanting to touch him more than anything, yet knowing this crossed the line from fantasy into reality. This was sexual, inexcusable, forbidden.

His hand covered hers, showing her how hard to grasp and how fast to pump, controlling her movements. Of its own vo-

lition, her other hand cupped his balls, needing no urging, accepting the inevitability of what they were doing.

“Let’s do this right,” he whispered, but his hips kept right on rocking. “I want you beneath me. I need to be inside you. This will never satisfy me for long.”

“Pretend.” She tightened her fingers as her hand slid up and down. “Close your eyes and imagine you’re inside me.” Lord knew her imagination had easily made the transition. She pictured herself on her knees, hands bound behind her back. He held on to her elbows and took her fast and hard, the impact jostling her breasts.

Her thumb swiped his tip, spreading the liquid gathering there. She waited for the burn, not caring if her skin blistered. This felt incredible. His balls tightened and drew up, yet they remained hot and heavy in her hand. He tossed his head, his loose hair brushing her face, a silken whip heightening her torment.

He shuddered violently, his shaft twitching against her fingers. A long, low moan escaped his throat as he spilled his seed into the dirt. She continued her firm caress until he relaxed and pulled her hand away.

Rather than release her, he turned around and drew her hand to his mouth. His lips pressed against the center of her palm; then he gently licked her thumb. “It’s not true, you know. We’re not really toxic. Let’s find some privacy and I’ll prove it to you.”

His words cut through her sexual haze and the hunger still burning inside her. They were standing in plain sight. Anyone could have stumbled upon them or watched from the shadows.

Damn it! She had to be more careful, couldn't let her body dictate to her mind.

She needed information, not a frantic tumble in the fallen leaves. And what was with the bondage? Nothing like that had ever tempted her before.

Clearing her throat, she did her best to sound as if she hadn't just rubbed against him like a cat in heat while he gleefully stroked himself. "We need to talk."

He chuckled and let go of her hand. "You need to talk. I thought we already established what I need." Without another word, he headed off through the trees.

She grabbed her rifle and helmet and hurried after him. "Who started the fight? Why were they fighting? Who is the jaguar female, and who was the tiger you challenged?"

Suddenly he stopped and jerked her toward him by the front of her suit. "It's going to take a lot more than a handjob if you want me to turn traitor." His tone was hateful and unnecessarily loud.

She started to look around and see if they were being watched, but he caught her chin and brought their faces together until their noses nearly touched. "Fight me." Though his mouth barely moved she clearly made out his words.

"Stop it." She jerked her head sharply to the side and struggled against his careless hold.

"I know you're not supposed to sleep with us, but can you go down on me instead? I might remember all sorts of things with your mouth sliding up and down."

Twisting away from his grasp, she managed to break his hold. He caught her upper arm and swung her back around.

“What about your ass? Is that still against the rules? There’s no possibility of conception that way, so what’s the harm?”

“You’re disgusting!” She swung her helmet at him, unwilling to risk the rifle going off accidentally. As they reeled and grappled, she tried to take in their surroundings, but everything was a blur, indistinct shadows against the darkness of the night.

His shoulder slammed into her belly, and he lifted her off the ground, his arm firmly banding her legs, and his hand boldly cupped her butt. “We’ll see if you still think I’m disgusting in an hour or two.”

Chapter Two

Grant locked the door to his cabin, then pulled on a pair of jeans before he returned his attention to his indignant guest. Sasha stood in the center of the main room, exactly where he'd set her down. She looked angry and bewildered.

"Do you know who was watching us? How long were they there?" she asked.

At least she'd figured out the reason for his sudden attitude change. Convincing her he wasn't a complete asshole wouldn't have been fun. "I'm not sure who, but they saw more than enough."

"And now they think we're here finishing what we started in the woods."

He crossed his arms over his chest and gazed at her with hungry appreciation. Even disheveled and mostly hidden beneath her protective suit, she was captivating. Her long auburn hair was braided, the thick plait resting over one shoulder. Curling tendrils teased her temples, accenting her large, dark eyes. And her lips... whenever he looked at those lush, pink lips his thoughts turned carnal and urgent. And possessive.

Dragging his gaze back to her eyes, he cleared his throat and refocused his mind. "There isn't anyone in the colony who doesn't know how we feel about each other. Isn't it time we stopped pretending?"

"Grant, don't." She sounded almost sad. "Wanting something doesn't make it right, doesn't make it possible."

He snatched her helmet from her hand and tossed it into a nearby chair. Her rifle followed, and then he pulled her into his arms. The release she'd given him in the forest had barely

taken the edge off the emotions surging through his system. He'd been a hairsbreadth away from ending Izak's miserable life. Everyone knew the rogue wouldn't stop, that his behavior would escalate until there was no choice but to resolve the situation permanently.

Grant had tasted blood, known his actions were justified, but he'd fought through the killing rage... for a human.

"Have you had a lover since you came here?" She tried to avoid his gaze, but he wouldn't allow the evasion. He caught her chin and guided her eyes back to his. "You can't sleep with those under your command. That's not allowed. And morphs are off limits too. So who fulfills your sexual needs, Major? Am I supposed to believe you don't have any?"

"My sexual needs are none of your business." Hostility narrowed her gaze, yet her lips remained moist and parted.

"I'm making them my business." He remembered those lips crushed beneath his, open to the thrust of his tongue.

She closed her eyes with a weary sigh. "I can't sleep with you. You know I can't, and you know why."

"It's a bullshit lie they use to keep this from happening. Do you think we're the first mixed couple to be attracted to each other?"

"How do you know it's not true? Have you ever slept with a human?"

"I haven't, but plenty of others have and no one died. It's ridiculous."

"I'd rather not find out the hard way. That's not why I came here."

He ignored the superficial argument. She was hiding behind the rules, while the cause of her hesitation lay deeper, the

reason more fundamental. Like most humans, she wasn't quite sure if he was human or animal. And what human would allow herself to desire an animal? That was fundamentally wrong. Perverted.

He wasn't empathic, exactly, but images often appeared in his mind, images inadvertently broadcast by other people.

The scent of her arousal intoxicated him still. He had no doubt she wanted him. But she'd sent him an image while she'd stroked him, an image so vivid and unexpected it had nearly triggered his climax. She'd been kneeling and her hands were bound behind her back. He'd held her elbows and thrust into her with deep, steady strokes. Her expression had been rapturous.

Why had she imagined herself bound? Perhaps he'd stumbled upon the key to winning his elusive human? Did she crave a firm hand as much as he longed to train her?

"I've watched you for months. No, more like years." He paused, torn by the implications of this opportunity. He desperately wanted to explore their attraction, but she could also become an invaluable ally if he could win her affection. "You're always disciplined, always in control, but beneath the reserve I sense your hunger, your need for passion."

"Occupational hazard." Defiance hardened her expression, but failed to disguise the vulnerability he glimpsed so often when she thought no one was looking. "Discipline is an inescapable part of the military. I'm what this life has made me. Aren't we all?"

"You expect me to betray my people, to tell you anything you want to know simply because you asked the question. What would that make me?"

“The information I’ve requested endangers no one.” She wiggled out of his embrace, tucking a stray wisp of hair behind her ear. “The attacks are growing more frequent and more violent. I need to understand what’s happening so I can—”

“The fact that you don’t understand what caused this attack only reveals how truly useless you people are!” His anger was counterproductive. Sasha wanted to help. That’s why she was here. “The only surprise is that there haven’t been more attacks like the one we interrupted. Sheila’s heart was still beating when I left. Were your people able to stabilize her?”

“Is Sheila the female jaguar?”

He growled and spun away, unable to hide his aggravation. “They were leopards, not jaguars. Do you really know so little about your captives?”

“We don’t consider you captives.”

“What are we, then? Pets? Zoological specimens? We’re frequently called refugees, but what the hell are we escaping?”

Rather than respond to his provocation, she slipped on her helmet and checked in with Eric. She told the young officer she had two more stops to make and then she’d head straight to her quarters, so he didn’t need to wait for her. “What’s the condition of the leopard female?”

Grant smiled as she corrected her earlier misconception. She’d also put herself at his mercy for the rest of the night whether she realized it or not.

“Thanks. I’ll pass the word. Young, out.” She pulled off the helmet and returned it to the chair before she explained, “Sheila’s lost a lot of blood, but the doctors are expecting a full recovery.”

“Good. She didn’t deserve any of this.”

Sasha took a deep breath and clasped her hands behind her back, looking very much the military officer. “I came here for answers, Grant. Not to play games. Who attacked Sheila, and what triggered the brawl?”

Despite the tension in her stance, her lower lip trembled. Grant noted the inconsistency without outward reaction, encouraged by the chink in her armor. He couldn’t allow her to retreat too far into her training. If she became the hardened soldier again, he’d never reach the woman inside. And they’d avoided these feelings too long already. It was time for action.

“Unfortunately for you, cats love games.” He moved toward her slowly. “We prowl, we stalk, we tease, and then we pounce.”

“I can’t sleep with you,” she said emphatically. “So what else can I offer? There has to be something you want.”

“My freedom.”

She tossed her braid over her shoulder with a frustrated sigh. “This is getting us nowhere.”

“I want the one thing that means more to you than anything else.”

Her delicate brows drew together, creating adorable furrows over her nose. “What do you think that is?”

He chuckled. “I should make you tell me what you’re thinking. I suspect our ideas are completely different. I’m talking about control.”

“You want me to give you control?” Her relieved sigh was premature. “Of what and for how long?”

“Of you—body, mind, and spirit—until dawn.”

“I can’t—”

“We won’t do anything that will risk your safety, or compromise your principles any more than what happened in the forest.”

“What happened in the forest was a mistake,” she insisted. “It was dangerous. I never should have touched you. That crossed the line, especially if someone saw me do it.”

He laughed. “Your principles only apply when others are watching? I never took you for a hypocrite.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Relax. I was teasing you. You’re taking all this much too seriously. There’s a world of gray between black and white. You’re not allowed to screw a morph, and you’ll honestly be able to say you didn’t when the sun rises tomorrow. But that’s all I’ll promise.”

He caught the gleam in her eyes as she glanced away. She was obviously scrambling for alternatives. “This is extortion. You’re expecting me to perform sexual favors in exchange for information.”

“I’m not expecting you to ‘perform’ anything. I want to exchange answers for submission. I want you to surrender control to me, and I’ll tell you anything you want to know while I explore your amazing body.”

“I’m not sure I see the difference.”

“You will.”

Sasha looked around the rustic cabin, anywhere but at Grant. He was too damn tempting, too handsome, too sexy. He’d slipped into a pair of faded jeans, but they did nothing to conceal the rugged masculinity evident in each highly defined muscle and ropy sinew.

Ice-blue eyes dominated features so strikingly regal he turned heads wherever he went. And that was saying a lot. All of the cats had an inherent nobility. Grant was unique, the only white-tiger shifter at Alpha Colony.

Images and memories melded in a surreal collage. She rubbed against his naked body, brazenly stroking his sex. Then he knelt behind her, taking her with possessive fervor, his hands clasping her bound arms.

Always bound. What was it about Grant that made her long for helplessness? Or was it only with Grant that she'd ever felt safe enough to indulge the fantasy?

"If you want answers, take off your suit."

His casual order cut through her distraction and ignited a fire in her blood. How literally did he expect to control her? "Body, mind, and spirit" didn't leave much room for interpretation.

"If I refuse?"

"There's the door." He took a step to the side, giving her a clear path to the portal.

Could she do this? Was the information worth the risk?

Sheila's image flashed through her mind, slashed and bloody, savaged. Eric hadn't mentioned whether or not she'd been raped, but Sasha suspected she had. Was the attack a crime of opportunity or had the motivation been more sinister?

With a revolted shudder, Sasha forced the images to the back of her mind. Yes, she needed answers and Grant was the person most likely to give them to her. Even so, she always tried to be honest with herself. The investigation was an excuse. She wanted Grant to touch her, kiss her, and put his mouth on her.

She wanted to dance as close to the fire as she dared without being consumed by the flames.

She was a fool.

Slowly lifting her hands to the front of her suit, she reinforced her determination. "This is a really bad idea," she whispered, her body pulsing in protest at the delay.

He came up behind her, his body warm even through her suit. "I'll leave my pants on no matter how much you beg. Does that make you feel safer?"

"You don't have to take them off to—" He reached around and grasped the front of her suit, jerking the halves apart. She gasped. "All right. I get it. This is about trust. You said you won't force me to have sex with you. Either I trust you or I don't."

"I've never forced myself on a female, and I won't start with you." His voice purred, playing over her senses, making her squirm.

There was no way he'd make this easy for her, but that was all right. Nothing in her life had come easy. She welcomed the challenge. "I know you think I won't be able to resist you, that I'll give in before the night is through. But it won't work. I've been horny so long I've forgotten what it feels like not to need an orgasm."

His chuckle was low and wicked as she pulled her arms free of the sleeves. "If you say so."

She bent and pulled off her boots; then he helped her step out of the bulky material. He draped the suit over the chair that contained her helmet, then turned to face her. She wore ankle socks, black panties, and a matching sports bra. Though the de-

sign of each was utilitarian rather than sexy, she felt exposed with so much of her flesh visible to his hungry gaze.

Grant wasn't a stranger. She knew him, had interacted with him in a variety of situations. He didn't butt into the business of others unless there was no other choice. He was more thoughtful than most of the other cats, but he wasn't afraid to stand up for what he felt was right. He wouldn't force himself on her. Of that she had no doubt. So as long as she held herself together enough to tell him no, she could learn what she needed to know without jeopardizing her career.

He walked around her in a lazy circle, his gaze sweeping up and down. "What were you told when you were brought here? Do you know any of the truth?"

His questions caught her by surprise. Not his questions so much as the bitterness driving the words. "I'm not sure what you mean. The truth about what?"

"I guess that answers my question." He stepped in front of her, his expression shuttered, eyes suddenly cold. "How long have shapeshifters existed?"

"Why are you asking me? You know more about your species than I do." She crossed her arms over her breasts and rubbed her upper arms.

"How long do you believe my kind has been around?"

Why the sudden inquisition? He was supposed to answer her questions. "I was taught that morphs have been hiding among humans for many centuries."

"Go on." A note of challenge crept into his tone. "What else were you taught?"

She took a deep breath and licked her lips. "This wasn't our agreement. You're supposed to explain what I saw in the clearing."

"And you're supposed to submit to me physically." He stalked toward her, gaze focused on her mouth. "Are you anxious for that part of our bargain to begin?"

"I'm standing in my underwear. I'm pretty sure we've already begun."

"We've barely begun. Come here."

He led her to a door on the back wall. She stepped over the threshold but went no farther until he lit a lamp on the nightstand. A large bed dominated the modest room. The high mattress appeared soft and inviting, but her gaze was drawn to the thick posts at each corner of the bed. Large metal loops had been attached to the posts, the fittings stout and functional rather than ornamental.

It didn't take much imagination to figure out what the loops were for. He intended to restrain her. Tingling currents of desire flowed through her, stimulating her body from the inside out. Had he sensed her need for submission or did he dominate all his lovers?

Thinking of him with anyone else dropped a weight into the pit of her stomach, so she concentrated on what he was doing. He crossed to the far wall and knelt in front of a large trunk, raising the intricately carved lid. "Take off the rest. I promised to keep my pants on, but I want you naked."

This was what she wanted. Wasn't it? Fear pushed icy fingers through her excitement, leaving her trembling, yet tingly. Would he bind her, paddle her, whip her? And worst of all,

would she like it, crave it, need it? Once she crossed this threshold there would be no going back.

As Grant had pointed out, her opportunities for sexual interaction were extremely limited. Even before she'd come to Alpha Colony, she'd been more focused on her career than her personal life. Her trusty vibrator had always taken care of her needs when a human alternative wasn't available.

Human alternative? The phrase sent uncertainty ricocheting through her brain. Grant was exciting and attractive, but he wasn't human. She couldn't let herself forget what he was no matter how tempting she found his humanoid form.

Not too long ago he had pinned another tiger to the forest floor with his powerful jaws as moonlight gleamed off his eerie white coat.

Wide cuffs attached to long lengths of chain draped his forearm when he returned to her side. "You're still dressed."

"I don't need to be naked." She tried to sound firm, but this was all unfamiliar territory. Her entire life had been rules and regulations, order and discipline. Control.

He was offering an opportunity to step out of that world and experience complete freedom. If she was bold enough to trust him.

"I say you do." His tone changed, took on an autocratic edge. He set the restraints on the bed, then faced her. "Lose the underwear or leave. It's your decision." He didn't raise his voice or glare. He simply explained the alternatives.

She wasn't ashamed of her body. She was troubled by the power she saw in his eyes, unsure if she wanted to submit to all that raw energy.

What did she have to lose? There was clearly more to gain by playing his game than by walking away.

With purposeful slowness, she took the bottom of her sports bra and pulled it off over her head. Her breasts swayed and her nipples tingled as they were exposed to the cool evening air. She waited, heart thudding. Would he touch her now? Kiss her again like he had in the forest?

His expression didn't change, nor did his tone. He held out his hand and said, "Now the panties and socks." After shedding her last few garments, she picked up her bra and handed the entire bundle to Grant. He set it aside and guided her into position at the foot of the bed, facing the center of the room. "Have you ever been bound before?"

Her heart fluttered and her nipples tingled. Only in my fantasies and only with you. The words caught in the back of her dry throat, so she simply shook her head.

"If I ask a question, you will answer verbally. Do you understand?"

She licked her lips and managed a weak, "Yes."

"The proper response is 'yes, sir.'"

She started to object, then thought better of it. "Yes, sir."

His warm hands caressed their way down her arm; then he took one of the cuffs and wrapped it around her wrist, securely buckling the straps. "How does that feel? You shouldn't be able to pull your hand free, but it shouldn't be uncomfortable."

"It feels odd, but not uncomfortable."

"Why does it feel odd?"

"I know I'll be helpless as soon as you secure the chains, and I don't like being helpless."

He paused, his thumb gently stroking her palm. "Sweetheart, you're helpless now. I wouldn't need restraints if I chose to hurt you. You're safe because I care about you, and I would never intentionally harm you. The rest accents the connection forming between us and allows us to heighten the pleasure."

There was no conceit in his tone, no arrogance. He was reminding her of the fundamental truth that existed in all living creatures. The strong either protected or destroyed those weaker than themselves. And there was no denying Grant was stronger than she was.

She could either trust him or remain suspicious, and he would either prove worthy of her trust or disappoint. Only time would tell how this scene would play out.

He bound her other wrist and then her ankles. His fingers stroked her skin, lightly massaging her muscles, gentling her. Then he paused on his knees and looked up into her eyes. "Move your legs apart. Make sure you can comfortably stand, but give me plenty of room to play." His lips brushed against her belly as he smiled, and his hands moved from her hips to her butt, caressing her cheeks as he waited for her to obey.

Plenty of room to play? With his fingers or his mouth or toys? What did he intend for her? There was a lot of time between now and sunrise, and all he'd promised was that he wouldn't have sex with her.

"Do I need to explain what happens when my directives are ignored?"

"No, sir." She moved her legs apart, then took a deep breath and widened her stance even more.

“Very nice.” His fingers trailed down the back of her thighs, lingering at the bend of her knees until she whimpered. All the while his mouth feathered nips and kisses across her abdomen.

Her body warmed, heated until her core melted and flowed, anticipating whatever he had in store. He secured her ankles to the bedposts without ever touching her sex. Her clit throbbed and her core clenched when he pushed to his feet and turned his attention to her arms.

Pressing her lips together, she fought back a groan. She would not give him the satisfaction of knowing how easily she was succumbing to his seduction. Her nipples were tight and flushed, and he hadn’t even touched her breasts. When had her body joined his team in this battle for information?

Her arms were held out by the restraints, leaving her spread-eagled before him. His gaze moved over her slowly, thoroughly before he focused on her face. “Now, why did you hesitate to call me sir? Am I unworthy of respect?”

Shit! That was a loaded question. She hadn’t even realized he’d noticed her hesitation. But she should have. Grant noticed everything. “May I answer honestly without fear of punishment?”

He chuckled, his gaze dipping to her breasts for a moment before returning to her eyes. “I could teach you not to fear punishment, but that’s a lesson for another night. I always want you to be honest with me. Still, I understand your question. Be as candid as you like. There will be no penalty regardless of my reaction to your answer.”

She nodded, moving restlessly as she tested the slack in the chains. “Sir is a title offered to those of superior rank or those who have earned respect. You’re my friend. I think of you as an

equal, therefore, in my culture, it would be more natural for us to refer to each other by name.”

He said nothing for a long time. Emotions crept over his features, but they were so subtle and so fleeting she was unable to decipher them.

“In my culture more is expected of males,” he told her. “We’re bred to be dominant and aggressive. We’re required to protect our mates, our young, and those unable to protect themselves. Therefore, our females and other subordinates offer us respect.”

“I’m not your female. I’m your friend.” The words slipped out before she could stop them, so she quickly softened the statement with a smile.

To her astonishment he returned her smile, his eyes sparkling like pale blue crystal. “You’re right. Until I’ve earned your respect, I won’t require you to call me sir.”

“Should I call you Grant?”

“For now.” He placed his hands on her hips and moved in close. “After tonight we’ll be a whole lot more than friends.”

Chapter Three

Izak bit into Amara's shoulder, shuddering with savage pleasure. She writhed beneath him, each fluid arch a silent demand. He must demonstrate his superior strength before she'd lower her head and raise her hips. No female would accept a mate who couldn't overpower her. He must be strong and fierce, able to protect her and her offspring.

She growled and bucked, not yet ready to surrender. Using his powerful back legs, he lunged, forcing her down, pinning her against the leaf-strewn ground. He moved quickly, mounting her, thrusting deep before she could dislodge him.

Breeding season was upon her, the evocative musk unmistakable. No other male had claimed her. His sensitive nose told him that as well. So why was she resisting? And why did this conflict arouse him far beyond the need to establish dominance? He wanted to savage her, shred her flesh with his claws, and lap her blood as he thrust into her flailing body.

The desire was twisted, depraved, unnatural. He understood all this on some distant level, but that didn't stop his mind from imagining the act, the brutality. He pumped faster and harder, restraining the darker impulses through sheer force of will.

She gradually stilled and lowered her head. Female morphs tolerated sex in animal form. They were driven by instinct to allow the act, but they only experienced orgasms within their human bodies.

Once she submitted, Izak lost interest, spilling his seed in a sudden gush. He held her still, hips tilted, for as long as she'd allow, ensuring his semen saturated the opening to her womb.

Her muscles flexed, and she shot forward with an unexpected burst of strength. Amara smoothly shifted, coming to her feet a short distance away. “And you wonder why no female will come near you in human form.” She panted, bracing her hands on her knees. Smooth golden skin gleamed in the moonlight. She was sleek and supple, though a bit scrawny, which was true of her cat form too. Brown strands threaded through her long blonde hair, identifying her as a tigress even in human form.

He transformed as well, rocking back onto his haunches. “If my seed manages to take root, you’ll be happy enough to have me around. We both know no other male will have you.”

Her golden gaze frosted over, any hint of lust gone in an instant. “You are such a bastard to bring that up now. There’s more to securing a mate than ambushing a female.” She took a step closer and lowered her voice. “I’d have thought the leopards would have taught you that tonight.”

Shock bombarded his mind with unwanted emotions and random thoughts. He’d been too busy fighting for his life to take stock of the observers. If Amara had witnessed that debacle, why had she been alone in the forest? She was too smart to intentionally put herself in harm’s way. Unless this is what she’d wanted all along.

Her last three pregnancies had ended in stillbirths, so last winter her mate set her aside. It was his right. Any of the other tigers would have done the same. Healthy offspring were not a choice for morphs, they were a matter of survival.

Izak took a moment to appreciate the irony. Innocent little Amara hadn’t just happened upon him in the forest. She’d

planned the meeting, knowing he'd be wild with bloodlust, looking for a release for his aggression.

He studied her with new interest. There wasn't much to recommend her. She was of average height and build. Her features were ordinary in human and tiger form. At least she was a tigress. Many cats took lovers among the other breeds, but hybrid children were almost always sterile, therefore useless. Nearly as useless as a barren female.

To think he'd felt sorry for taking out his frustration on Amara. He hadn't taken advantage of a vulnerable female. He'd been skillfully ambushed.

"The leopards overreacted to something they didn't understand," he muttered, unwilling to explain the details to Amara or anyone.

She scoffed, her eyes gleaming in the moonlight. "Let me guess. Sheila wanted you to take her, to show her all the forbidden pleasures only possible in human form. She teased you, wrapped her scent around you, until you couldn't control yourself any longer."

"You have no idea what you're talking about and it's none of your business anyway. What happened is between me and Sheila."

"There's two problems with that attitude." She held up her index finger. "First, you hurt Sheila badly enough that transformation didn't heal her. Now the humans are involved."

This was unexpected, but not hopeless. "She won't say a word and neither will the leopards. This is between me and them."

"That brings me to the second problem. Grant marked you. Transformation didn't heal the bite on your neck. If Major

Young gets one look at you, the leopards won't have to say a word. She'll know exactly who attacked Sheila, and then none of us will be able to protect you."

Izak touched his fingertips to the side of his neck and they came away smeared with blood. "Damn him. I will not hide from those wretched humans!"

Amara shrugged, a cruel sort of amusement creeping into her gaze. "Then turn yourself in and beg for mercy. They've always been so reasonable with our kind in the past."

* * * * *

Pausing to savor the reality of having Sasha chained at the foot of his bed, Grant absorbed the fire and tenderness cascading through his body. For so long he'd imagined her in restraints trembling with need and anticipation. He'd always thought it was an unattainable dream. No hard-ass soldier would surrender control to anyone.

He'd accepted that he would have to suppress his dominant nature if he wanted her in his bed. He'd even prepared himself mentally for the compromise. Then he'd glimpsed her secret fantasies.

He knew she was uncertain. Not afraid of him per se, but unsure if their relationship would be worth the disruption it would bring to the rest of her life.

For that reason, he moved slowly, allowing her time to accept each new phase, each new intimacy. But it wasn't easy. He was ravenous for the feel of her soft body writhing against his, and the scent of her arousal as she gave herself over to pleasure.

And her taste! She would not leave until he'd imprinted her taste on his senses. He'd explore her soft curves and silken hollows and drink from her creamy slit while she shuddered in release.

"I've kept my side of the bargain." Her gaze hesitantly lifted to his. "Who was the tiger you challenged, and why did he attack the leopard female?"

He pressed his hands against her neck, thumbs supporting her chin. "I suggest we start with the fundamentals of my people and work toward the specifics of that incident. Our agreement is until sunrise, so we have plenty of time."

She tensed, her lashes suddenly shadowing her eyes. "Despite the fact that I mistook a leopard for a jaguar, I'm not as ignorant as you're presuming. I was fully briefed before I came here, and this is my second assignment at a morph colony."

His hands slid to her shoulders and he swayed toward her, stopping just short of pressing his chest against her breasts. "So enlighten me. When and how did the morph colonies come into existence?"

She hissed out a breath so deep her nipples brushed his chest. "You're going to insist that whatever I believe is wrong, so why don't you enlighten me instead?"

Her skin fascinated him. Not a hint of hair marred the ivory perfection. In humanoid form female morphs possessed transparent fuzz that made their skin feel like velvet. Sasha's was truly smooth. Even her mound was devoid of hair. He couldn't wait to feel those silky folds part for his fingers or his tongue.

The longer he kept her talking, the longer he'd have to wait for the pleasures he was imagining. Besides, she was right, their agreement had been for him to supply the information.

Skimming his fingers along the outer swell of her breasts, he settled his hands on her waist. “As you said, there have been stories of shapeshifters for as long as there have been humans, but the origin of my species is far more recent and far more specific.”

Her dark eyes narrowed and her tongue quickly wet her lower lip. “What are you talking about?”

Would she believe what he was about to tell her? She’d been indoctrinated with lies and half-truths. Like their seed was toxic. Why would she believe his word over what she’d been told, what she’d believed for years?

Even if he failed, he had to try.

“Ninety-seven years ago an ambitious team of scientists decided to incorporate specific characteristics of various animals into the DNA of humans.” She didn’t laugh or roll her eyes, so he went on. “The first generation of hybrids was so successful the scientists disregarded the program parameters and secretly created a series of species unlike anything that had ever existed before—at least outside the realm of fantasy.”

It took her a moment to make the connection; then her eyes narrowed and her body drew back from the possibility. “They created... morphs?” Her disbelief was understandable. She was one of them. Part of the government-funded conglomerate responsible for... He had to stay on task, stay focused on the issues at hand.

“My grandparents’ generation was the first.”

“But... are you saying every morph in all of the colonies were born in captivity? That they’re the result of these experiments?” She shook her head, braid whipping about her shoulders. “That’s not possible. I’ve been on raids. I’ve—”

“You’ve located renegades who dared to escape from the colonies.” He stepped back from her helpless body, fists clenched at his sides. His anger had no place in the activities he had planned for tonight. He would use his strength to control her, but never would he touch her in anger.

She didn’t know the truth. He’d known her long enough to understand that she believed their web of lies and had acted accordingly.

“That’s not what we were told,” she said. “Morphs refused to register, to submit to DNA testing and—”

“The morphs you captured had assimilated into society. They dared to live free, away from the ‘protective reserves’ the governments so kindly provided for my kind. So, teams like yours hunt them down and drag them back to the prisons where ‘we belong.’ My parents lived free for eleven years. They turned themselves in when complications arose during one of my mother’s pregnancies. My father sacrificed his freedom and my mother still died.”

Her breasts jostled with each ragged breath, distracting him from his anger. She was not responsible for the wrongs done to him or his people. She had never been cruel, never treated anyone unfairly—within the structure forced upon her.

Her only sin was ignorance, and they were changing that right now.

“Were you the only cub to survive? Do you have brothers and sisters?”

“Let’s keep things general for now. I only used my parents as an example of a much larger problem.”

“I’m still incredibly sorry for your loss.” Sincerity rang in each word, and her eyes were tear-bright and filled with sorrow.

It wasn't a new wound. Grant had been dealing with the events his entire life.

"There's one thing that doesn't make sense to me," Sasha said.

"Only one?" The corners of his mouth quirked. Sasha never had just one question.

"Why create so many if all they planned to do was lock you away on primitive reserves?"

"They didn't intend to create so many, but evolution has a strange sense of humor." He clasped his hands behind his back, not wanting her to misinterpret his tension. He wasn't angry with her. He was frustrated by all that had gone before and all that was left unresolved. "Our females give birth in animal form, which often means multiple births. Also morphs mature faster than humans, so we reproduce faster. Twenty-five years into the project every research facility they'd built was bursting at the seams. They were faced with a moral dilemma. Genocide or deception on a global scale. They could destroy all evidence of their overambitious project or convince the world morphs were produced by a naturally occurring genetic mutation."

"That's when they came up with the colony idea?"

He nodded, patiently searching her gaze. Did she believe any of this? "The political controversy surrounding the DNA Registration Act gave them the perfect opportunity to avoid destroying us. They claimed DNA registration inadvertently exposed the existence of shapeshifters hiding among human populations all over the world.

"They offered us amnesty for our nonexistent crimes if we would turn ourselves in and submit to genetic testing. Of course we refused, so they had no choice but to round us up

and incarcerate us for the 'safety of the general population.' Riots ensued and the rest is history. The morph colonies were fortified, and all technology within the boundaries was prohibited. Now the colonies are basically maximum security quarantine areas inside which we roam free."

"Inside which you're completely dependent upon them for your very existence." She shook her head, disgust clear in her expression.

He smiled and consciously released his tension with a deep breath. "They like to think so, but we're not as helpless as they imagine. Game is released at their discretion, but fish is still plentiful. Most of our parents spent their lives in cages. This isn't so bad." Her familiar scent soothed him more than it should have. He spent too much time in the trees tracking her, following her when she had no idea he was there. "I didn't tell you all this so you'd feel sorry for me. I told you so you'd begin to understand the world around you. You didn't even know the difference between a jaguar and a leopard."

Sasha refused to be baited by the insult. Her head was still reeling from all he'd said. "It's a common mistake. Jaguars are bigger, but the two look very much alike."

How could she verify the information Grant had dumped at her feet without becoming a target herself? Her instinct, that voice deep inside, told her he spoke the truth. The morphs had never seemed hostile to her. They had seemed frustrated and disgusted and demoralized, but not dangerous.

Well, some of them were definitely dangerous. Or they could be driven to acts of violence. Like what she'd witnessed in the forest.

“There are only three jaguars at Alpha Colony and all three are male. As soon as you saw Sheila in human form, you should have known she was a leopard. It’s simple inventory.”

“You’re right. I haven’t done my homework. I don’t know nearly as much about you and your people as I should.” They lapsed into silence and she stared beyond him. She needed his touch, needed to understand the feelings churning inside her. She was naked and restrained, and yet she felt no danger. He could do anything he wanted with her. Why wasn’t she afraid? “Will you teach me what I need to know?”

In the span of a heartbeat he was in front of her again, hands framing her face. “Are you sure you’re ready to learn?”

He wasn’t human, but he was no mindless beast. It might be wrong to want him, but she had never felt this way about a human male, never hungered for one, ached to feel them moving deep inside her while the rest of the world faded away.

“I’m ready,” she whispered.

“We’ll take it a step at a time. You give me something I want, and I’ll give you something you want.”

“That sounds fair.” Even though she was chained at the foot of his bed, he wasn’t leaving her helpless.

“Kiss me, really kiss me, and I’ll tell you about the rebellion.”

“There’s a rebellion? Against who?”

He chuckled and lowered his head, brushing his lips against hers. “I want your tongue in my mouth.”

Happy to oblige, she tilted her head and fitted her mouth over his, finding the best angle. It was a bit awkward without being able to use her hands, but he more than compensated by wrapping his arm around her back and pressing her snugly

against his chest. His lips parted, warm and waiting, but it was obvious he wanted her to kiss him.

She traced the seam of his lips with her tongue, then slowly pushed inside. His deep groan was its own reward. She licked and slid, exploring with ever bolder strokes until his tongue curled around hers and the kiss became wildly interactive.

“Dyauna.” He whispered the name against her kiss-swollen lips. “She’s leading a rebellion against Maddox and his Barbary pride.”

She tried to break away, to ask more questions, but Grant no longer seemed interested in conversation. His hands moved boldly over her body, cupping her breasts and stroking her skin, rubbing against her as if he owned her body and soul.

It was damn hard to object when everything he did felt incredibly good and made her hunger for more. *Quid pro quo*. He’d suggested the concept and it was the only way she’d retain any semblance of her sanity.

“Tell me more about Maddox, and I’ll let you put your fingers inside me.” Her voice sounded strangled, but the bold suggestion was enough to raise Grant’s head from her breast. Anger snapped in his gaze and his hands tightened against her flesh. “Isn’t that the deal?” She took a deep breath, determined to come out of this with her dignity intact. “Information for physical submission?”

He wrapped his arm around her waist and pressed her against his hips. His face hovered over hers, eyes intense. He eased back and pushed his hand between her thighs, then parted her folds. “We’re venturing dangerously close to that elusive line. Are you sure you’ll be able to stop once you feel me moving inside you?”

“Fingers. That’s all I’m offering.”

Two long fingers drilled into her core, the fullness just enough to make her moan. “I’ll gladly take whatever you freely offer. I’d just hoped you’d start to see beyond the game.” He stared into her eyes, his fingers a constant reminder of what they really wanted.

All he had to do was rid himself of the jeans and replace his fingers with his cock. She was desperate for motion or clitoral stimulation. He gave her neither. She rocked her hips and dropped her head back on her shoulders, refusing to look at him as her inner muscles rippled and clenched.

“How’s that feel?”

With her limbs spread and secured, all she could do was accept what he chose to give. He had to know this wouldn’t get her off. It was only driving her crazy. Perhaps that was the point. She was still trying to maintain control. Make the game interactive. He wanted her passive, submissive—well, that just wasn’t her.

“Tell me about Maddox,” she snapped. If he’d just move his fingers or touch her clit this would be a lot more interesting.

“He’s a Barbary lion shifter, very rare, very well respected.” Those long fingers pulled nearly out then thrust back in, the isolated penetration not enough to do more than add to her agitation.

“Why are the others rebelling against him?”

“That’s a completely different question. It will cost you something far more precious than allowing me to put my fingers inside you.”

She gasped and opened her eyes. “You started this game. Why are you angry?”

“Because it’s not a game with me. I want your willing submission. I need it if there is ever to be anything between us. I thought this ‘game’ would satisfy your pride, make it easier for you to trust me with your pleasure.”

“I trust you,” she whispered.

“Not yet, but you will. I’ll make this really easy for you, Sasha. We’ll barter with pleasure. Each time you want a situation explained you must allow me to give you an orgasm in any way I choose. No questions, no details. You’re mine.”

Chapter Four

Sasha stared at Grant in confusion. “I thought that’s what I did.” She kept her voice soft and non-confrontational. His fingers lightly stroked her folds though they were no longer inside her.

“No. You offered a specific act for a specific answer. I want to keep things fluid, changeable. I want you to wonder where I’ll touch you next, and what I’ll use to send you over the edge. Part of submission is trusting your Dom enough to choose these things for you. There is freedom in submission, but only if you learn to let go. Are you ready to leave Major Young behind for a few hours and release Sasha into my keeping?”

She swallowed hard, amazed by the potency of the temptation. She spent so much of her life suppressing her emotions, being hard and cold, untouchable. Just the thought of surrendering completely to Grant, letting him take over for a while, was undeniably appealing.

“Until dawn. Then I put on my gear and things go back to normal.”

“We’ll renegotiate at sunrise,” he said with a sexy smile. “So you want to understand about the rebels?”

With smooth agility he unfastened her legs from the chains, leaving the cuffs around her ankles. She expected him to do the same with her arms, but he had something else in mind.

He caught the back of her knee with one hand and pushed the other between her thighs. She rocked back, feeling the pressure of the cuffs against her wrists and the helplessness of her position.

She clasped the chains above her hands to steady herself, but she was off balanced and unsteady. His fingers pushed into her core again, but this time they began the steady sliding she'd been craving all night. His thumb brushed over her clit, launching sensations deep into her abdomen.

"Barbary pride wants unity." Grant's voice demanded her attention while his fingers scattered her thoughts. It was so unfair. Couldn't he wait until she came to give her the information? As if sensing her dilemma, his fingers slowed and his thumb hovered over her clit. "If you come, I'm done talking. Fight it off. Control your desire. Your orgasms belong to me now. I'll tell you when to come."

She bit her lower lip and defused the gathering spasm. His thumb abandoned her clit, leaving only the steady slide of his fingers. She closed her eyes and imagined that her legs were wrapped around his waist, and she was impaled on his cock. His strong hands would support her hips as he shuttled in and out.

"The other leaders are falling in line behind Maddox. He's compelling and strong." Grant left his fingers deep and circled her clit. Oh, that made it much harder to resist. Her inner muscles tensed and fluttered. Electric pulses shot down her legs and up her spine.

"I need to come," she cried. "Please, may I come?"

"Go ahead, but you'll owe me another orgasm if you want to know about Dyauna."

His fingers moved fast and deep, his thumb firmly rubbing her clit. Sasha came in hard, rhythmic spasms, helplessly jerking against his hand. The pleasure cascaded through her, awakening senses she didn't know she possessed. She hung suspend-

ed beyond reality for an endless moment, then floated back to earth.

Her leg wobbled as he returned her foot to the floor. What had just happened? That was unlike any orgasm she'd ever experienced before. Did it just feel better with a morph or had the restraints somehow freed her to... He'd said there was freedom in submission. She was starting to understand what he meant.

"Are you all right?" He brushed her hair back from her face, his gaze searching hers.

"My hands are starting to go numb and I can really feel the pressure on my ribs." It was true, but it was an evasion. She found the discomfort oddly arousing.

"I'll reposition you as soon as you tell me what's bothering you."

"I'm not bothered, exactly. That just felt different than an ordinary orgasm. It was almost as if..." She couldn't put the feeling into words. It sounded too fantastical.

"Your spirit left your body?"

She nodded. "It wasn't unpleasant, just disconcerting."

"We're breaking down emotional barriers, walls that have kept you confined and limited for years. But these barriers have also made you feel secure and comfortable. Change is never easy." True to his word, he released the chains suspending her arms, but he left the cuffs in place. "On the bed, on your back, arms overhead."

She didn't hesitate, but uncertainty surged inside her. Did she want to break down all her emotional barriers? She still had to be able to function in the real world once the sun rose and this adventure was over.

A ridiculous emptiness burrowed into her chest as silence spread between them. She couldn't have him, not in any lasting way. So why was she allowing this to continue?

He stood at the foot of the bed, making no move to refasten her restraints. Had he lost interest in their game already? It wasn't a game to him. He was training a potential... what? She couldn't be his mate, couldn't even be his lover.

"Don't." The angry snap in his tone brought her gaze to his. "Tonight is mine. Stop thinking about tomorrow."

"I'm sorry."

"Part your thighs. Bend your knees and offer yourself to me."

Willing submission. The cuffs reminded her of her role, but this time he wanted her free to resist, free to deny him.

She drew up her knees, then let her legs fall open, shamelessly exposing herself in blatant invitation. He growled, his gaze narrowing on her sex. Excitement spiraled through her, and she closed her eyes, savoring the sweet rush of sensation.

The mattress dipped as he joined her on the bed. Something warm and moist stirred against her inner thigh, not even a touch really, more like—his breath. Her eyes flew open and she bit back a moan. He crouched over her, moving slowly up her thigh as he inhaled her scent again and again.

"I want your cream, so don't fight your need to come." He dipped his head and swiped her slit with his tongue. "But you don't have permission to touch me. Keep your hands above your head."

She clutched the bedding, not trusting herself to remember his order once her arousal rose. His hands swept up the insides

of her thighs and he brushed his thumbs over her folds, caressing as he opened her farther.

He traced her crease, then gently sucked her folds, his mouth bold yet careful. His tongue swept over her outer lips before returning to the heart of her desire. "Are all humans smooth like this?"

"Not naturally. Many of us have our body hair removed." His thumbs kept stroking her hairless flesh, then he dipped his head, licking one side and then the other. "Does it bother you?"

"No. Your skin is incredibly soft." His tongue pushed into her core. "All of you is incredibly soft."

After the first few moments of exploration his approach changed. He slipped his arms beneath her knees and cupped her breasts as his mouth settled over her slit. His lips caressed her folds while his tongue ventured deeper. He swirled inside her, then flicked her clit. Swirl, flick, swirl, flick, until her hips rocked against his mouth.

"Be still. Focus on my kiss. Accept the sensations without allowing them to dictate your movements."

"I'm sorry, sir." The title just slipped out.

Rather than dwelling on the development, he returned to her sex and sucked her clit into his mouth. Pleasure detonated inside her like a plasma charge. She screamed, her back bowing as her inner muscles convulsed.

His lips released her clit as he pushed two fingers deep into her passage. He paired each steady thrust with a tender lick on her swollen clit. She lay perfectly still, determined to learn what he was trying to teach her.

The need to thrash and grind was nearly overwhelming. Her abdomen quivered and her breasts jiggled as he filled her

with his fingers. Another orgasm gathered in the ashes of the sensual explosion.

She absorbed the pleasure, enjoying the tingling tension rather than rushing past it and diving headlong into the culmination. His fingers slid and his tongue flicked, lifting her higher and driving her onward.

Then his fingers thrust deep and his tongue circled, expanding the rings of sensation until they encompassed her entire body. He pressed down on her clit and opened a floodgate deep inside her. Pleasure washed over her and flowed through her, sweeping her along as she relaxed into the ripples.

Grant shot up along her body, capturing her mouth in a demanding kiss. He ached so bad, he had no idea how he'd find the strength to keep his promise. As long as she remained beneath him, he was doomed.

Wrapping her firmly in his arms, he rolled with her, settling her warm body over his. She balanced on her knees, hands on his shoulders, breasts just out of reach.

"We have to stop," she whispered, gaze luminous and wild. "I can't do this." Even as she uttered the denials, she lifted up and unzipped his jeans.

Her fingers curved around his shaft and he groaned helplessly. He caught her wrist. "I promised I wouldn't take you."

"Then I'll take you." With nearly violent determination, she worked his pants down past his knees. Then she guided his cock to her opening and stared deep into his eyes. "This isn't wrong. Nothing in my entire life has ever felt so right. I want you inside me."

Her snug passage spread around his flared tip. The pleasure drove the breath from his lungs and abolished his good inten-

tions. She was so damn tight and hot he wasn't sure he'd survive.

Rather than watch his shaft disappear into her core, he focused on her eyes, amazed by the possessive hunger he saw burning there. They weren't just words. She needed this as badly as he did. His pulse leaped and he sucked air into his burning lungs.

Deeper and deeper she took him until his entire length was enveloped by her passage. He pushed up and scooted back, dragging her with him. She straddled his lap, their bodies still joined.

"I would have kept my promise." He kissed her gently, slowly, exploring her breasts as their tongues mated.

"Are you saying this is my fault?" she asked as his lips moved to the underside of her jaw.

"There must be wrongdoing to assign blame and we both agree this isn't wrong." He guided her hands to his shoulders and grasped her tight little ass. "Ride me, love."

Balanced on her knees, she rocked and swayed, raising and lowering her hips to maximize the slide of flesh against flesh. Her head dropped back, thrusting her breasts forward, and his aggressive nature surged with brutal intensity.

"Release me from my vow," he panted, his tone harsh and urgent. "I can't come like this. Ask me to take you—now!"

"Please, sir, take me. I need you now."

That was the second time she'd called him sir. The realization sealed her fate. He wouldn't just take her, he'd claim her, and find a way to keep her by his side.

He flipped her onto her back and pushed against the headboard with his feet until he had room to kneel between her

legs. Miraculously he stayed inside her. He pinned her arms to the bed and thrust into her core with hard, deep strokes.

She raised her legs high against his sides, offering her silken depths without restricting his range of motion. Their gazes locked and penetrated, sharing the wonder of the connection they were forging.

“I need to... Please may I come?”

“Yes.” Her gaze clouded and her face flushed as her body pulsed around his. He eased his hand between their bodies, prolonging each shuddering spasm. “I want to mark you, announce to the world that you’re mine. I want my scent all over your body, but I can’t.”

“Why not?” She tensed, growing restless beneath him. “You said this was safe.”

“I’m not toxic to you. That’s not the problem.” He clenched his teeth and closed his eyes. With a frustrated growl, he pressed her down into the mattress. He kissed her long and deep, savoring the velvety clasp of her inner walls. “I’ll never do anything to endanger you. I thought you understood that.” With an audible groan, he pulled out and used his hand to bring on his release.

The physical pleasure was intense, but his heart ached as the sheets absorbed his seed.

She pressed herself against his back and wrapped her arms around his chest. “I would have done that for you. This feels very one-sided.”

He sighed, dizzied by the conflicting emotions raging through him. He’d been inside her! Her taste still lingered on his tongue, and yet he felt restless and empty, not blissfully satisfied.

“The toxic business is nonsense, but we can’t risk discovery. Even if your human colleagues don’t detect my scent, the other males will notice as soon as my seed makes contact with your skin.”

“What about in the forest?”

“I don’t think any got on your hand, but it’s probably best if you shower while I repair the bed. Then I’ll tell you about Dyauna.”

Chapter Five

Sasha closed her eyes and let the warm water saturate her hair. Her body was relaxed and content, but turmoil twisted her thoughts and emotions. This night had been extraordinary. Grant seemed to know her body better than she knew herself. He'd selflessly given her climax after climax and then compromised his own pleasure to protect her.

Contraceptive injections were mandatory for all military personnel and routine vaccinations prevented STDs, making prophylactics unnecessary. She'd never even considered needing protection from a lover's scent.

Still, there had to be a way for Grant to fully enjoy their... their what? This wasn't an affair, it was a pipedream. There was no way they could be together. The physical challenge of concealing their intimacies was the least of their worries.

She washed her hair and scrubbed her body as her thoughts digressed beyond the amazing sex to the tale Grant had told her. As an imaginative story, it was tragic and dramatic and guaranteed to inspire angst in the colony's inhabitants.

But what if it had been a history lesson? Shouldn't she find a way to help the captive morphs? She had no idea what she could do. Would her position be a benefit or a hindrance? First and foremost, she needed to verify his story. She knew what she'd been taught and now she understood what the morphs believed. The truth very likely rested somewhere in the middle.

With her hair wrapped in one towel and a second concealing her body, she entered the bedroom. Grant had returned the restraints to the chest and stripped the bed. He was in the process of remaking it when she walked in.

“Almost done.” He didn’t look at her. He’d dressed, donning a T-shirt as well as his jeans.

Tension was palpable in the room. Not the delicious sort of tension that preceded a burst of passion, but the uncomfortable awareness of insurmountable obstacles.

“This cabin doesn’t look prefab like the ones in the village. Did you build it yourself?” The last thing she cared about was his domicile, yet anything else would be too risky until her emotions stabilized.

“Did you plan that segue?” She didn’t understand the question until he went on, “The rebels helped me build the cabin in exchange for certain favors. The prefab boxes DOMA provides for us to live in, among other myriad indignities, is the reason Dyauna broke off contact with the keepers and headed out on her own. She’s not naive enough to believe they don’t track her movements, but for the most part she lives off the land, in harmony with the Divine Provider.”

“She takes nothing from DOMA, not even basic utilities?” Grant’s cabin was secluded, but he had running water and electricity.

“She’s more in touch with her animal side than most or she’s convinced herself she is. She has a very compelling personality. She attracts more followers every day.”

Understanding sliced through her sluggish mind. “You’re one of them, aren’t you? You’re one of Dyauna’s rebels.”

“My role is less defined. I admire what she’s doing and why, but I think she’s wasting her time. Ignoring a problem doesn’t make it go away. She might live a less restricted life than those who settled in the village, but she’s a prisoner just like the

rest of us.” He finished with the bed and turned to the closet. “Would you like a shirt or something?”

“It’s probably better if I just suit up.”

“Better for whom?” He closed the closet door, stormed across the room, and left her alone with her doubts.

* * * * *

Grant had never been so frustrated in his life. He’d thought being with Sasha, tasting her pleasure and feeling the hot grip of her body, would ease the fire in his blood. Instead it had only stoked the flames. He wanted to rip the towels from her and use them to cushion their knees while he took her as she’d pictured in her fantasy. He’d hold her arms behind her back and thrust fast and hard until they both screamed in pleasure.

The need to claim her—really claim her—surged and clawed, demanding action, demanding release. He had to get her out of here. His self-control was hanging by a thread.

He had her gear in hand as she emerged from the bedroom. “Our conversation will have to wait until tomorrow.”

Her gaze narrowed and suspicion creased her brow. “You said we’d—”

“Sasha, I’m so close to feral right now, you should be running out the door.” He let his cat surface for an instant, stinging his eyes and producing a guttural rumble deep in his throat.

To her credit she didn’t argue. She dressed as quickly as possible and picked up her helmet and rifle. “Should I come here or will—”

“I’ll find you. Now go!”

She turned and left.

Grant stripped off his clothes and went outside as soon as she'd gone. He transformed, welcoming the familiar pain and the disorienting shift in perspective. His senses altered, smell surging to the forefront while sight seemed distorted until his brain adapted to the change. Her scent filled his nose, poorly disguised by soap and shampoo.

Mine. The word resonated through his being, urging him to follow and track her, pursue. Yet he still burned to declare his claim with his cock and his seed. Not yet. He must run, exhaust himself before he went near her again. He must protect his mate, even if he was the danger.

Bounding into the darkness, he ran as fast as his legs would carry him, with no particular destination. Up the mountain-side and deeper into the woodlands he ran, away from the village and the lions leading the push for unity.

Their determination to adapt to this intolerable excuse for a life was almost as futile as Dyauna's rebellion.

They had been sequestered, warehoused, locked away out of sight and out of the minds of humanity. They were DOMA's dirty little secret. The humans had no intention of admitting to their true origins, much less taking responsibility for their mistakes.

Mistakes? Do you consider us a mistake?

Dyauna's familiar voice sounded inside his mind, slowing his punishing pace to a relaxed jog. Most morphs could send and receive thoughts. Dyauna was just better at it than most. She could locate other morphs and communicate with them from anywhere in the colony.

He didn't sense her nearby, but he suspected she was the one who had been watching in the forest while Sasha... He

stopped the carnal spiral of his thoughts before they began. If he let himself remember anything that had happened in the last few hours, he'd charge into her quarters and damn the consequences.

It doesn't matter what I think. Our existence is a reality and fixating on the past is a waste of energy.

Neutrality is a waste of energy. Her signal was stronger now.

A rock ledge extended beyond the tree line, overlooking the village below.

Even if you trust me, as you claim, many of your people will never accept me, and we both know it.

She walked out of the trees and stood beside him, naked and unashamed. Clothing was destroyed whenever a morph transformed, so they generally didn't bother getting dressed. Except in the village, where cats conformed to human expectations. Modesty was a human concept. Morphs were comfortable with each other whether in cat or human form.

With her long blonde hair rippling in the wind and moonlight gleaming off her supple body, Dyauna gazed out over the village. "Why do you come here, Grant? I know it's one of your favorite spots on the entire reserve."

He transformed, rolling his shoulders and rubbing the back of his neck before he responded to her question. "It's peaceful here."

"You have the village below you and my camp behind you. This place is an unconscious representation of your life. You're suspended between two worlds. Tolerated in both, yet accepted by neither."

"That's true of every morph."

She shot him a sidelong glance. “I wasn’t talking about cats and humans. I was talking about us and them.” She motioned to herself and then to the village, further illustrating her point.

“I’m different, Dyauna, and everyone knows it. I’ll always be an outcast.”

“Only because you choose to be.”

He didn’t argue. It was a longstanding, tired debate. He’d become her pet project. She would recruit him for her cause or die trying. Or at least that’s how it felt most days.

“Where is Sasha now? If you claimed her, it isn’t safe for her to return—”

“I’m not a complete imbecile.”

She turned toward him, eyes shimmering in the moonlight. “Why does this human arouse you like no morph can? Have you paused to consider that question? I even tried to attract your interest, but you’ve always been obsessed with the enemy.”

“Sasha is not our enemy.”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a long time, and your grandfather has compiled some statistics that support my hypothesis.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t think DOMA ever abandoned their projects. I think they were refined, scaled back to avoid transformation, but they’re still creating hybrids.”

“You think Sasha is a hybrid?”

“How else would she have triggered mating fever in the colony’s most devout bachelor?” She smiled and tossed her head as she turned toward the trees. “Think about it. Or better yet, talk to Grandpa. I’m sure he’d be more than interested in your unusual reaction to a human female.”

When the order for Sasha to report to General Hidaka's office popped up on her com-screen the following morning her heart sank into the pit of her stomach and panic paralyzed her lungs. This couldn't be happening. Whoever had seen her with Grant in the forest must have reported her inappropriate behavior.

She took a deep breath and responded to the summons, letting the general know she was on her way.

How could she calmly defend her actions when everything within her wanted to scream that it was none of their damn business? They would forbid her to interact with Grant on any level at minimum, transfer her or dishonorably discharge her at worst.

And that was only their likely reaction to her touching him. If they had proof of what transpired in the cabin, the consequences would be much worse.

Taking a moment to calm her expression and check her uniform, she opened the door to the common hallway and headed for the administrative wing. Each apartment in the complex was identical, small and functional. Opposite the door she had used was a door leading directly outside, allowing occupants to come and go with the feeling of privacy. Continual surveillance and well-placed guards rendered true privacy nearly nonexistent.

Sasha was ushered into the general's office as soon as she arrived. Not a good sign at all. Hidaka blanked his com-screen and motioned toward the chair in front of his desk. "At ease, Major. Have a seat."

At ease? Was he kidding? Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she lowered herself into the chair.

“Were you and Corporal Rushdie the only members of your team to have direct contact with the injured leopard?”

“Yes, sir.” The response sent an unexpected tingle down her spine. The last time she’d spoken those words she’d been chained to Grant’s bed.

“Darman wants to check everyone for some bizarre virus. Thinks it might be responsible for the rise in violent outbursts.” He leaned back in his chair and smiled. “You’re not feeling violent are you, Major?”

“No, sir, just frustrated by our lack of progress. Maybe the director’s discovery will be the break we’ve been waiting for.”

“We can always hope.”

“Do I need to notify Corporal Rushdie?”

The general shook his head. “He’s already there.”

“Will that be all?”

“That’s up to Darman. You’re off the roster until he clears you. Dismissed.” She made it to the door before he stopped her. “Sasha, if I find out you went off solo again, I’ll kick your ass myself. I know the cats trust you, but that relationship won’t help anyone if you’re dead.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you learn anything useful?”

“Not yet.”

“Keep me in the loop.”

“Of course, sir.” She closed the door to his office weak with relief. She’d dodged a bullet. Hell, she’d dodged a barrage of bullets and lived to tell the tale.

Sasha's hands were still shaking when she arrived at the medical complex. Adrenaline was a pain in the ass when it wasn't really needed.

The medical complex was located on the far side of the military compound so morphs were able to slip in and out of the infirmary with minimal contact with their "keepers." Sasha had always hated the label, but now it felt even more offensive. She didn't want to be a keeper, a repressor, a soldier so blinded by duty she was no longer able to think for herself.

Slipping off her helmet, she tucked it under her arm and entered the medical complex. Her nose wrinkled at the antiseptic smell as she hurried toward Darman's office. It was empty and she smiled. She didn't know why she'd bothered. Darman lived in the laboratory when he wasn't overseeing the medical staff. He was never in his office.

She found him in the lab, studying a complex diagram of something she didn't recognize. Dressed in the dark blue uniform worn by medical personnel, he looked remarkably hale and hearty for someone in his eighties. His hair was snow white and all the styling in the world couldn't tame its determination to curl. With bright blue eyes and a well-trimmed goatee, he had always struck her as a little bit rakish. She tapped on the doorframe, drawing his attention.

"Ah, Major Young," he greeted and deactivated the diagram, "let's go to exam room three and I'll explain what's going on."

"Is Eric still here? What about the trauma team? Were any of them infected?"

He chuckled at her impatience and motioned her along. "You're in no imminent danger. I just want to make sure this doesn't spread."

Accepting the explanation until she had more information, she hurried along at his side.

Exam room three was at the end of a short hall, oddly removed from the hub of activity. Was the possibility of contagion more serious than he was letting on?

She didn't have time to analyze the clues any further. Darman opened the door and stepped into the room after her. The director closed and locked the door, making Sasha feel decidedly uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry for the deception, but we could think of no other way to free up your schedule for the next few days."

"Who the hell is 'we' and why does my schedule need to be free?"

"Such language." Grant stepped out from behind the dressing screen and grinned at her.

"What's going on?" Why would Director Darman help Grant? She wasn't even sure what Grant was trying to do. Had all this been set in motion so he could see her again? That seemed unlikely. "Is there even a virus?"

"No, but it's vital that everyone else believe there is," Grant said.

"I would like to examine you and run some tests, but it has nothing to do with a rogue virus," Darman explained.

"What does it have to do with, and why is he here?" She motioned toward Grant, unsure how to deal with his presence. She was thrilled to see him, had nearly thrown herself into his arms when he stepped out from behind the screen. But if their

indiscretion was still a secret, she had no intention of blowing it now.

Darman smiled, his dark eyes crinkling at the corners. "Grant is my grandson and his happiness means more to me than anything."

Her jaw dropped. She couldn't help it. Did Hidaka know about this? Shame washed over her in the wake of her astonishment. Why had the general been her first concern? That was so disloyal to Grant.

"It's not some deep, dark secret," Darman assured her with an enigmatic smile. "We don't go out of our way to make sure everyone knows, but we've never denied the connection."

"All right, even if you are his grandfather, why am I really here?"

"You've triggered... a biological instinct in Grant that he shouldn't be feeling for a human."

"Mating fever?" She looked at Grant directly. "Is that what happened last night? Why you sent me away so suddenly?"

"To fully understand this, you're going to need a crash course in morph biology," Darman said. "Hop up on the table so I can check your vital signs."

Grant sank into one of the two chairs as she slipped off her rifle's harness. She handed the weapon to him along with her helmet and sat on the edge of the exam table. A screen inset in the wall behind her activated automatically, displaying her vital signs for the director.

"Humans are taught that having sex with a morph is dangerous, that their semen is potentially toxic. This is a bit of fabrication."

Her gaze shot toward Grant. He'd told her the truth. All he'd been worried about last night was another male detecting his scent. He'd known he wouldn't hurt her if he'd come inside her.

"Why the scare tactic?"

"It's the general's preference that there be no fraternization at all between his troops and my cats, so he's used the complication to his advantage."

"What complication? You just said there is no danger."

"No, I said their semen isn't toxic. Certain females are at risk from morph males." Darman made an adjustment to the scanner, then went on. "When a female has dormant aptitudes in her physiology, sexual interaction with a morph male can trigger a dramatic metamorphosis."

"Screwing a morph turns some women into morphs?" She had to make sure she understood what he meant.

"It's not that simple. If the female is pure human, there's no danger."

"You don't think I'm human? Is that where this is going?"

Darman glanced at Grant before he said, "In a word, yes. But if you'd be a little less impatient, I'll explain how I came to this supposition."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude. It's just not every day you're told you're not human."

"I'm not human," Darman admitted cheerfully. "Or not purely human. It's my understanding that you know how morphs came into being."

Just like that, the Executive Director of Alpha Colony admitted he was part of a global cover-up? For a long moment,

all she could do was stare at him. “Then it’s true? Morphs aren’t evolutionary anomalies?”

Darman looked at Grant and shook his head. “It still astounds me every time I realize someone actually believes that nonsense.”

“People believe what they need to believe to ensure their lives remain in balance. I sort of screwed that up for Sasha last night.”

Darman turned back to her, his expression serious again. “I was adamantly opposed to the cover up, but no one gives a damn what scientists think. I also had no direct involvement in phase three.”

“His team created hybrids not morphs,” Grant clarified.

“Did you alter your own DNA or was this done to you?”

“I volunteered, as did most of the members of my team. We wanted to be sure the procedure was safe before we moved forward.”

Despite the sincerity in his tone, Sasha wasn’t convinced. “That’s very noble, but it doesn’t make sense. If something went wrong, the project would have been devastated by your loss. Why did you really do it?”

“Look at me. We saw what the feline DNA did for the test subjects and we wanted what they had. Is that so hard to understand?”

“And DOMA allowed it?”

“It was my project. They weren’t in a position to dictate to me.”

“In other words, ‘it was easier to beg forgiveness than ask permission,’” Grant said. “His superiors knew nothing about it until it was too late. They’ve been suspicious of him ever since.

He might be the civilian head of the morph colonies, but DO-MA keeps him on a pretty short leash.”

Resentment hardened Darman’s expression. He didn’t argue with Grant’s description. Still, it obviously bothered him.

“So, how can I be a hybrid, yet know nothing about it?” The same way she hadn’t suspected the truth about morphs. People only saw what they were allowed to see. Information was strictly regulated by endless layers of bureaucracy. “They’re still at it, aren’t they? They’ve just gone further underground.”

“I’m way out of the loop now,” Darman said, “but that’s my best guess.”

“How do we stop them? What should we do?”

Darman chuckled. “Let’s solve the current mystery before we take on the world. How’s that sound?”

“Far too reasonable for my current state of mind.”

“I understand, but the longest journey is made one step at a time. Grant, why don’t you wait in my office? This could take a while.”

“What if someone sees him?”

“Sees my grandson loitering in my office? They’ll probably ask him if he needs anything, and then go about their business. Relax. You’re among friends.”

“I’ll go set up the clinic,” Grant told his grandfather; then he smiled at Sasha and added, “You’re in good hands. I’ll see you later.”

Relaxation was not Sasha’s strong suit on a good day and this day was far from good. She’d thought Grant’s revelations were astonishing. Now they’d been compounded with the possibility that her DNA had been altered without her knowledge.

“How long have you been in the military?” Darman opened a compartment in the exam table and took out a handheld scanner and a device she didn’t recognize.

“Fourteen years.”

“Have you noticed any unusual changes in your physical or mental abilities during those fourteen years?”

“I’ve grown stronger and I can run faster, but that’s physical conditioning. I always excelled academically, so I don’t honestly know if I’m smarter.”

He swabbed the inside of her mouth and inserted the swab into the unfamiliar device. “This only takes a few minutes, but I wanted to speak with you privately. I can neutralize mating fever. If you only feel a passing fancy for Grant, it would probably be the wisest course.”

“My fancy for Grant has been simmering for years. I was extremely attracted to him the first time I saw him.”

“All right. Neutralization is off the table. Let’s see what we’re dealing with.” He picked up the DNA sequencer and scrolled through several screens. “It’s official, my dear. You might work for *Homo sapiens* but you aren’t one.”

“If they jacked with my DNA, I’m sure I’m not the only one. There are probably no humans left in the military.”

For some reason Darman found that extremely funny. “I’ve suspected that for years.”

“So what am I?” Oh God, what if they’d interjected more than cat DNA. What if she was a hodgepodge of all sorts of wacky stuff?

“Every time we tried multiple crossmutation the result was disastrous. You’re definitely a feline hybrid. I’m trying to verify which species.”

She accepted the information without argument; then her mind snapped to attention. “You just read my thoughts. I didn’t say the last part out loud.”

“I told you I wasn’t human. All the morphs are telepathic.” He glanced at her and smiled. “I’ll have Grant work with you when we’re done here. I bet he can have you sending and receiving thoughts before the day is through.”

Something on the screen caught his attention. He leaned forward and stroked his beard.

“What is it? What do you see?”

“Let me verify this before I explain. I want to be absolutely sure of my findings.” He walked to the access terminal across from the table and activated three separate applications before he spoke again. “Good. That’s a relief,” he muttered, then issued a series of commands. The terminal’s verbal response made no sense to her, but Darman finally turned back around.

“Well?”

“Sorry. I’m really not tormenting you intentionally. These are the facts. Your DNA contains several feline segments, and the recessive genes within those segments indicate the donor was a white tiger.”

She refused to panic. His explanation had barely begun. “Grant and I aren’t related, are we?”

“No. The genetic material contained in your DNA was extracted from a different donor than either of Grant’s parents. That’s what I triple checked before this conversation went any further.”

“You said you’re Grant’s grandfather. Did you alter the DNA of one of your biological children or... never mind. It’s none of my business.”

“My son applied for inclusion in the program, but he was twenty-three at the time. I rejected his application and he kept reapplying until I gave in. Now you know where Grant gets his stubborn streak.”

“And his mother? Was she part of your program as well? Were they expected to... was a mating schedule included in this program?”

“Christina was a morph not a hybrid. My only role in her life was father-in-law. As for a mating program.” He chuckled. “Cat DNA makes any encouragement on our part unnecessary. I can’t speak for the other projects, I only work with cats.”

“Okay, so I have tiger DNA. My superiors have to know about this. I have yearly physicals and—”

“Of course they know. More than likely they did this to you. Why do you think you’re only allowed to see military doctors?”

“They lock away morphs while they create more hybrids. It’s almost too twisted to accept.” She released a tense breath and focused on the present. “What do I do? What are my options?”

“The rest is for you and Grant to decide together. You’re both infected with this mysterious virus, so I’m going to quarantine you in the old clinic. Grant knows how to tap into the security system, so you’ll be warned if anyone approaches the building. I’ve already been exposed, so I’ll deliver your meals personally. That should give you plenty of time to figure out if you want to secure a future for yourselves or take on the world.”

Chapter Six

Grant watched Sasha approach the abandoned clinic on the newly reactivated security screen. His erection increased with every step she took. The perimeter alarm had warned him of her presence, so he felt confident in the preparations he'd made. Her rifle was slung over her shoulder, but she'd left her helmet behind. She was off duty, quarantined until further notice. And so was he.

Mine. The cat in him had known all along that Sasha was different, had sensed a connection the man in him was unable to define.

But Dyauna had figured it out. Dyauna was suspicious of all things human, so her mind wandered down paths others disregarded as foolish and impossible. She expected the worst and too often the worst was what she received.

The door swung open and Sasha moved into the room, carefully locking the door behind her. "Are we alone?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

Rather than answer her question with words, he charged, pressing her against the door and sealing his mouth over hers. He heard the dull thunk of her rifle landing on the floor, and then her arms wrapped around his neck. She raised one leg to his hip and rubbed her mound against his erection.

Before she arrived he'd drawn the blinds and scanned for surveillance equipment other than the units he controlled. They were safe from prying eyes and unwanted interruptions.

"Are you—"

"Feline hybrid," she confirmed, tugging his shirt off over his head. He jerked her suit open down the front while she

went to work on his zipper. Tugging her arms out of the sleeves still left her breasts covered, so he ripped her bra open as well.

They left a trail of discarded clothes from the front door to the first room they came to with a flat surface. He bent her over the exam table and gathered her arms behind her back.

An excited shiver shook her shoulders and the scent of her arousal blossomed all around him. Her legs were already wide enough to accommodate his entry, but he kicked her feet wider and urged her farther forward until she rested on her toes.

He pushed between her thighs, coating his shaft with her cream. Then he thrust to the hilt with one forceful drive. She cried out sharply, her core squeezing him in rippling waves. He closed his eyes against the pleasure, never wanting it to end.

Possessive desire coursed through him, blinding him with its red haze. He shifted her wrists to one hand and cupped her breast with the other. All the while he took her hard and fast as he'd longed to do since he saw the image in her mind. She came again, the rhythmic spasms driving him precariously close to release.

Holding still inside her until the last twinges passed, he gritted his teeth and forced his body to obey. This would last longer than five seconds. He had more control than that.

He drew out slowly, ignoring her whispered protest. With one hand on the small of her back, he released her arms and said, "You will only move if I tell you to move, and you will not come again until I give you permission. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry I didn't wait. I know better."

The hushed surrender in her tone sent tenderness surging through his being. She wanted this, needed this as badly as he

did. "We'll discuss your punishment later. Right now I need you, disobedient or not."

He turned her around and lifted her to the table, guiding her hands to the far side so she could hold herself up. Then he knelt and spread her thighs wide, pausing to savor her evocative scent.

"Watch me. Don't shift your gaze from me and do not close your eyes."

Sasha's feet rested on his back as he bent to her creamy folds. She gasped and shivered, her hips shifting restlessly. Remaining still was almost impossible whenever his tongue circled her clit. Pleasure spiraled, deepening into the beginnings of an orgasm.

She dug her fingernails into her palms, but the sting only heightened the pleasure. "Please, sir. Stop! I can't hold back when you..." His tongue retreated, gently outlining her slit until she regained control of her senses.

Over and over he took her to the edge, pulling her back just before she tumbled over into oblivion. Her abdomen quivered and her thighs trembled. How much longer would he make her wait?

Not long, my love. He stood, shifting her legs to his elbows as he positioned himself at her entrance. "If I come inside you, there's a real chance you'll transform. It won't happen right away, but it could happen. Are you ready for that possibility or should I pull out again?"

"Never again. I'm already a hybrid. I'd be honored to join the ranks of the morphs."

He started to say something and regret flashed through his expression, but burning desire incinerated the weaker emotion

as if it had never been. His hands slipped beneath her and he pushed into her slowly. They both watched his thick shaft disappear into her body.

All distractions dissolved with his first thrust and she focused entirely on the pleasure. She braced for each drive, letting the impact push her higher. Knowing he wouldn't pull out, that they'd enjoy the climax together, filled her with joy and tenderness like she'd never experienced before.

The fullness intensified and his gaze bore into hers. *Now, Sasha. Come for me now.*

Her body happily obeyed, her orgasm starting before he finished the command. He clasped her to his chest as his cock bucked deep inside her. His tongue pushed past her lips, filling her mouth with the taste of her pleasure as his seed saturated her inner walls.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and returned his kiss with equal fervor. Her eyes drifted closed and lights danced within her mind. Sensations continued to rain down upon her, washing over her, soothing her—and drawing her deeper into him.

He gave of himself freely, replacing her essence with his. She was afraid to open her eyes, afraid their bodies had literally fused into one large pulsating entity.

His telepathic chuckle eased her uncertainty. *You're safe, sweetheart, and there is only one part of my body inside yours.*

She opened her eyes then, blinking to clear her vision. "Why have you never sent your thoughts to me before?"

"I had no idea you'd be able to hear them."

"But you've always been able to hear mine."

“No.” He brushed her hair back from her face and pushed her braid behind her back. “I can manage to send and receive thoughts if someone is intentionally transmitting. I occasionally pick up stray thoughts and images, but reading minds requires an aptitude I don’t possess.”

He’d glanced away when he said “stray thoughts and images.” She was starting to learn how to interpret his expressions and the knowledge was liberating. “So what thoughts or images have I inadvertently sent to you?”

“There have been so many down through the years.” He nipped at her bottom lip, then whispered, “Where would I start?”

“With the one that made you hide your gaze from me.”

His brows slanted to a challenging angle and he tilted her hips, making his awakening erection unmistakable. “While you touched me in the forest, you told me to pretend I was inside you, then an image flashed into my mind. You were on your knees and I was taking you from behind. I wasn’t being gentle. I took you hard and deep. But even that didn’t really surprise me. I’ve always known you were passionate. What I found remarkable was—”

“That my hands were tied behind my back?” His only response was a nod as his gaze devoured hers. “So you tailored what happened in the cabin to fulfill my fantasy?” If he was doing this for her it was artificial, like a costume he could take off when it no longer entertained.

“I won’t pretend that I wasn’t trying to enlist your imagination in my seduction, but all the image really did was confirm that my feelings were real. I could never mate with a female who didn’t crave submission. This isn’t a preference with

me. It's not like my favorite sexual position. My basic nature is dominant. I can be no other way."

She wasn't sure what inspired the motion, but she lay back across the width of the table and spread her arms out along its length. Her head hung over the other side and her breasts were thrust upward by the arch of her back. She relaxed her legs as he grasped her hips and his elbows caught the bend of her knees.

He moved slowly, focusing them both on the slide of his shaft in and out of her core. Her clit twitched and her nipples tingled, but she surrendered entirely to him, trusting him with her pleasure, just trusting him.

Sasha looked so incredibly lovely spread before him in willing submission, but he knew the position wouldn't remain comfortable and he wanted this time to last. He moved his hands to her waist and pushed in deep.

"Grab me with your legs. I want to swing you around the other way."

"How many ways do you swing?" She laughed, but did as he directed.

"Now raise your arms above your head. I think this will work a little better." He waited until her legs released, then started thrusting again.

A gradual smile parted her lips and she turned her face away.

"Don't hide your reactions from me. What's making you smile?"

"This makes it seem like we're playing doctor, and I'm feeling especially naughty."

Lust blasted his composure and he momentarily lost his rhythm. “Speaking of naughty, we need to discuss your punishment.”

“You didn’t tell me not to come,” she objected, but mischief brightened her eyes.

“Why did you apologize if you’d done nothing wrong?” He pulled out and mustered his sternest expression. This might be playful, but the lessons were important.

“Because my pleasure belongs to you now, and I come when you decide I deserve it.”

“Or when you genuinely need it or whenever it pleases me. The important thing is, I control your pleasure and you deprived me of that privilege twice. Do you disagree with anything I’ve said?”

She remained on her back, arms over her head, legs draping his arms. “No, sir.”

Despite the words, she didn’t sound quite convinced. Cream made her folds shiny and gleamed on her inner thighs. A rivulet of pearly liquid trailed out and disappeared into the crease of her ass. He closed his eyes against the temptation. He’d just begun to earn her trust. Nothing would compromise the progress they’d made.

An idea took shape within his mind, a creative, titillating taste of the pleasures he intended for them to share. “Turn over. Draw your knees beneath you, then spread your legs far enough for your feet to dangle off each side of the table.”

Her eyes widened with uncertainty, but she rotated her torso and he helped her turn over. Then he stood back and watched her position herself as he’d described. Her slim body was folded nearly in half, ass in the air, forearms on the table.

She was craning her neck so she could see him, but he couldn't allow even that. She needed to realize she could trust him even when she couldn't see what he was doing.

"Lower your head and close your eyes."

Only after she'd complied did he continue. He stroked her body, massaging tense muscles and caressing smooth skin. Working from her shoulders down to her delightfully curved backside, he gave the tempting cheeks a firm squeeze, then headed up her other side to her shoulder.

He dragged the fastener off the end of her braid and unwove her hair with his fingers. Color came alive within the thick strands, crimson and copper and gold. He spread the thick mass over her back and rubbed her skin with its softness.

"I've never seen your hair unbound before. It's lovely."

"Thank you, sir." Her response was stronger, her tone even.

Moving closer to the foot of the table, he rested one hand on the small of her back and caressed her butt with the other. "Have you earned punishment?"

"Yes, sir. As soon as I saw your expression, I knew you were struggling for control just as hard as I was. I selfishly chose to come rather than waiting for you."

Pleased by the detail in her answer, his determination faltered. What if pain extinguished her excitement rather than intensifying the burn? She was his mate! He would not cheat her out of new experiences because he was afraid.

Reaching between her legs from in front, he lightly caught the puffy little nub between his thumb and his first two fingers. She tensed, then relaxed as she waited for his next move.

He rubbed the ass cheek nearest him, a subtle warning of his intentions, then he gave her two firm swats with his free

hand. Her clit twitched wildly and cream quickly covered his fingertips. His inhibitions flowed out in a tingling rush. She was truly his mate, made for his touch, ready to experience life in all its savage glory. Apparently she wasn't the only one who needed to learn how to trust.

Her other cheek looked pale and neglected as brilliant color blossomed on its twin. He echoed the stroke on the other side and her response was even more astounding.

She let out a keening cry and raised her hips higher. "Are you close, my love? Should I let you come?"

"Please, sir. I don't want to disappoint you again, but I'm no good at this."

"You're amazing, sweetheart. Come." He gently tugged on her clit, ensuring her obedience, but he needn't have bothered. She shuddered and cried out, then shuddered some more.

While her afterglow still smoldered, he moved to the end of the table and pulled her toward him. He used the foot control to lower the table and pulled her right onto his waiting shaft.

She tossed her head, fiery hair whipping about her shoulders. Her head was supposed to be down, but the sight was so glorious he didn't remind her. The snug heat of her passage gripped him firmly, caressing him with heat and pressure.

He filled her again and again as his hands skimmed over her arching body. Each time they joined it seemed more intense, the desire for each other more demanding. His hands grasped her waist as he shuttled in and out. Soon she thrust back against him, increasing the impact and depth of each stroke. He cried out, fighting hard to keep from coming.

She muffled a scream with a wad of her hair, but the sound thrilled Grant. He steadied her with his hands and pounded into her harder than he'd ever dared before. She was stronger than any human female, strong enough to nurture his seed.

The possibility was so exciting that his orgasm caught him by surprise. He wrapped his arms around her hips and spilled deep inside her, dazzled by the intensity.

Her throaty laughter drew him back to reality. "Why are you laughing?"

"At this rate we'll never get out of this room, much less create the appearance that we're sleeping in separate beds."

He reluctantly separated their bodies and helped her down from the table. After a long, leisurely kiss, he slipped his hand between her thighs and gathered a mixture of her cream and his seed.

She watched him, eyes wide and curious. He'd been careful not to touch her clit or ignite another bout before she'd had time to recover from the first two. He painted her nipples with the silky moisture and she bit her bottom lip. But when he brought a second scoop to her armpit, she caught his wrist.

"What in the world are you doing?"

"Marking my territory." His gaze dared her to object.

After a brief hesitation she placed her hands behind her head and held her hair out of the way. He covered each of her pulse points in turn, the bend of her knees and elbows and below her earlobes.

"Does this mean I never get to bathe?" She smiled despite the confusion lingering in her gaze.

"It's more ritual than necessity, but it quiets the cat to have my scent all over you."

“Our scent? That was as much me as you. I’m willing to surrender control in the bedroom, but our lives have to be shared. I won’t be a doormat for anyone, not even you.”

“I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

* * * * *

Grant showed her around the clinic while their passions smoldered. Sasha couldn’t believe how quickly she was aroused after each breath-stealing orgasm. Ignoring his objections, she pulled on his T-shirt and refused to look at him until he donned his jeans.

“Modesty is a human concept. Morphs spend much of our time naked out of necessity.”

“How does being a morph necessitate nudity?” She followed him back into the reception area, the only room with a table and chairs. They sat facing each other, the span of wood helping them keep their hands to themselves.

“Clothes don’t transform with us. We either undress before we shift or shred whatever we’re wearing, which still leaves us naked when we shift back into human form. It’s just more trouble than it’s worth. Our children don’t giggle and stare when they see a naked body because they’ve never been taught that it’s shameful.”

“They don’t run around naked in the village and you’re the only morph who ever approached me while you were naked.”

“The morphs in the village don’t count,” he grumbled. “They’re more human than cat.”

“Spoken like a true rebel?”

He just shook his head, a lazy smile curving his lips. "I can't wait to introduce you to Dyauna. I think you'll like each other."

She'd heard a lot about the rebel leader, but Dyauna avoided humans like the plague. "Your grandfather said we needed to decide if we wanted to secure a future for ourselves or take on the world. Do you know what he meant?"

"More or less. Ironically it started with Dyauna. She was the one who saw us in the forest and she was the first to suspect you weren't entirely human."

"What made her suspicious of my origins? I'm not significantly stronger or faster than others on my team."

"If this is as big as we think it is, they are probably all hybrids of one sort or another. Was your feline DNA from a white tiger?"

"Yes. And Director Darman confirmed that there's no genetic connection between you and me, or I wouldn't be here."

"Obviously. But the similarity in our genetic profiles explains our attraction. Morphs are always drawn to those who are biologically compatible. The higher the compatibility, the stronger the attraction. It's a survival mechanism frequently found in endangered species, or so my grandfather tells me."

"Why do you say morphs are endangered? The colonies are so crowded DOMA has been talking about opening a fifth location for years."

"And yet it never gets built. Why do you think that is?"

She shrugged. "Funding? They can't figure out where to put it? I don't know."

"They did the math and realized they won't need it. Our population is shrinking at an alarming rate. Morphs, at least fe-

line morphs, have always been genetically predisposed to producing male offspring.”

She chuckled. “I think you’ve been spending too much time with your grandfather. We simple soldiers would say cats tend to have more boys than girls.”

“There is nothing simple about you, but I’ll attempt to simplify my explanation.” He winked and then went on, “The fact that morphs reproduce in litters caused an unexpected surge when the program began. But by the time the first generation of cubs matured enough to mate it was obvious there were going to be complications.”

“Monogamy flew out the window along with modesty?”

He smiled and reached across the table to entwine their fingers. “None of this affects us, so don’t freak out as I explain it. Morph females generally choose their first mate and then their primary mate determines who will join them or have access to her during her breeding season.”

“Why is it his choice and not hers?”

“Male morphs are dominant and possessive.” As if he needed to remind her. “She has the option to refuse his choice, but if he didn’t have control of the process it would never work.”

“And I’m sure females make subtle, and not so subtle, suggestions from time to time.” A faint smile curved her lips as risqué images teased her imagination.

“I’m sure all sorts of compromises are made. I’m just explaining the social framework we operate within.”

She nodded, forcing her mind to refocus on the underlying cause for the sexual freedom. “It keeps the gene pool diversified and keeps the males from fighting to the death over the females. So, why isn’t it working?”

“Last year only one cub in twenty was female and the ratio is shrinking every year. Grandfather has had teams of researchers working on a solution for as long as I can remember, but they haven’t come up with anything yet.”

“Is this why Sheila was attacked? Was the tiger you challenged trying to claim her as a mate?”

“Tigers and leopards can have sex, but few cubs are ever produced as a result. And when they are, the cubs are sterile.”

“Then why do they bother?”

He chuckled and gently squeezed her hand. “Attempting to stabilize the population isn’t the only reason morphs have sex. Sometimes we simply enjoy the act.”

“I don’t think Sheila enjoyed what happened to her.”

“What happened to Sheila had nothing to do with procreation. Izak is out of control.”

“Izak?”

He sighed, his gaze narrowed with wariness. “Am I talking to my lover or Major Young?”

“Major Young is so far off mission, I suspect she’s deserted her post.”

“Permanently?”

“Permanently.” Saying it out loud helped her solidify the reality in her mind. She was way beyond the point of no return. She wasn’t sure how her future would look, but she would never wear a military uniform again.

“When males are continually rejected as potential lesser mates they become aggressive. Sometimes they turn rogue. Izak has been rejected by every female tiger’s primary mate, so he has no hope of ever producing cubs of his own.”

“It’s hard not to feel sorry for him.”

“That’s only because you’ve never met him in human form.” He heaved a frustrated sigh and rubbed his forehead as he continued. “Last summer he joined the rebels largely to have access to the female leopards.”

“Dyauna is a leopard?”

“Yes, and all but two of the leopards are among her followers. Anyway, Izak had no more luck finding a lover than he’d had finding a mate. He’s mean and impatient, and no female will put up with his personality.”

“Was Sheila his target or was she just in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

“I don’t honestly know. Dyauna could tell you the specifics, but this is a leopard problem now.”

“And Dyauna doesn’t take shit from anyone?”

“Exactly.”

The more she learned about Dyauna, the more intrigued she became. Grant was likely right. Dyauna sounded like the type of person she would enjoy knowing.

“You refer to the cat in you and the man in you,” she said after a short pause. “I’m feeling a similar duality. I find what Sasha wants is at odds with what Major Young feels compelled to do.”

“Major Young is AWOL. Remember? Never to return.”

“Sasha is firmly in control, but Major Young is stubbornly fighting for survival. I know I’m finished with the military, but I don’t yet see how I fit in to your world.”

“Maybe I can help with that.” He leaned forward and brushed a kiss against her knuckles. Then he scooted back his chair and stood. “This is the ‘secure a future or change the

world' part, and either one will require you to sever all ties with Major Young."

As if their lovemaking hadn't done so already. She might be able to leverage what she'd learned about hybrids into a dishonorable discharge, but her career was obliterated. No turning back.

"My father was one of the last males accepted into DO-MA's program. By then a spontaneous ability had begun to pop up in some of the morphs."

"Your father was a hybrid not a morph, correct?"

"Yes. I inherited my ability to transform from my mother."

"Go on. I didn't mean to distract you."

"Just being near you distracts me." He stood behind the chair he'd been sitting in and rested his hands on the back. "I called it an ability, but it happens spontaneously, so that's not really the right term."

"You're talking about the fact that having sex with them made certain hybrid females transform into morphs?"

He smiled. "You have a remarkable way of simplifying complicated concepts."

"And you have a remarkable way of complicating concepts that are actually rather simple. I already see where you're going with this. Did Darman hype up this ability when he engineered your father?"

"Yes."

"How many females did your father transform?"

"Eleven. This was before he met my mother."

She laughed. "I thought morphs weren't monogamous?"

"It's a bit hypocritical, I agree. But my father wasn't a morph."

“True. Have you transformed anyone?”

Grant shook his head. “I’ve never slept with a hybrid before, but my grandfather says whatever he engineered into my father’s DNA is still intact in mine.”

“Did your father ever sleep with a hybrid that didn’t transform?”

After a pause he shook his head again and admitted, “They all transformed.”

“Then it’s only a matter of time for me?” Heat washed over her followed immediately by a rush of cold. Every time she saw a morph transform it left her spellbound. Was it really possible she would experience the phenomenon for herself?

“Very likely.”

The concept was so surreal, she wasn’t sure how she felt about it. “How does this help us change the world?”

“If you’re willing, my grandfather would like to record your transformation. You will have to be recorded continually until you shift because we have no idea when it will happen, or how long it will take you to morph the first time. You could shift into cat and back before I could trigger the camera.”

“How will this recording benefit anyone?”

“After we’ve edited out anything we don’t want to share with the general public, we’ll leak the file and hope it goes viral.”

“So I’ll have my fifteen minutes of fame. What will that accomplish?”

“As well as your actual transformation, we’ll include interviews detailing what you’ve gone through and the secrets DO-MA is so determined to keep.”

“No one will believe us. DOMA will claim the file was manipulated or make it disappear before anyone sees it.”

“That’s why it’s so important that this go viral. We post it beyond the government’s filters and pray that public curiosity will do the rest.”

“And how will we accomplish that?”

“That’s not our part of the mission. My grandfather has friends in high places. They’ve protected him for years. Why do you think he’s still around when so many of his colleagues have mysteriously disappeared?”

“So we just turn on surveillance and screw like bunnies until I transform?”

He laughed, his eyes twinkling merrily. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

Chapter Seven

“I’m bored!” Izak sat in a dismal cave high in the mountains, head resting against the roughhewn wall. Amara had brought him food and offered her body at least once for the past three days, but even her visits failed to break up the monotony.

“You’re still alive, which is miraculous with Dyauna on your trail.” Amara stood near the mouth of the cave, hands on her hips. It would be weeks yet before she was certain if she carried his cubs, which was the only reason he kept mounting her. She barely stirred his interest enough to give him an erection. Even so, at the moment, she was all that stood between him and the leopards. He wasn’t a coward by any means, but he knew a futile fight when he saw one.

“I can’t hide forever. Sooner or later I’ll have to take a stand and—”

“And be ripped apart by the leopards? They might prefer a solitary life, but they hunt together. And right now, sweet cheeks, you’re their prey.”

“I have to do something or I’ll go insane.” He pushed to his feet and tossed his hair out of his eyes. “Bring me someone to entertain me, or better yet lure someone up here and I’ll let you play with them too.”

“You’re disgusting.” Her voice lacked any real conviction.

“Am I?” He crossed to her with two long strides and grasped her by the throat. “I’ve seen the cruelty in your eyes. You didn’t seek me out as a last resort. You’re just as depraved as I am.”

“I won’t hurt another cat,” she insisted and she sounded like she meant every word. “But I admit I’ve wondered what

it would feel like to indulge some of my more interesting fantasies.”

His cock hardened as he gazed into her eyes. Here was the true Amara, the twisted soul he'd glimpsed but not yet met. “You could find us a puppy.”

“Not too young or he'd be of no use to me.”

“We can compromise.”

Her nipples hardened and the scent of her arousal rose as he drew her deeper into the cave. “It will be so dangerous,” she purred, unmistakably excited by the thought. “Cats can't just stroll into dog territory without being confronted.”

“So don't get caught.” He twisted her nipple with his free hand, watching lust ignite in her gaze.

“It will take time and planning if I'm going to snatch a dog without leaving a trail.”

“You're good at this sort of thing.” He moved his hand to her other breast and found her nipple tightly beaded, ready for his punishing squeeze. “It's easier to be patient if I know there's something worth waiting for.”

“I could disguise myself as a guard. They all look the same with their uniforms on.”

He released her neck so he could work both her nipples at once. The harder he pinched the better she liked it. “Where will you get the gear?”

“Like I said, it will take planning.”

“Then get on your knees. You can think while I enjoy your mouth.”

Sasha clutched the blanket beneath her and arched into each of Grant's deep thrusts. After a few frustrating minutes on the narrow bed, he'd torn the bedding off and tossed it to the floor. She understood his haste, feeling just as eager, just as impatient for his fullness deep inside her.

He knelt behind her and filled her with one demanding thrust. Then he grasped her hips and pounded into her, hurling her toward another orgasm. With little to do but have sex, they'd explored the clinic for the past four days. They initiated each room and every available surface. He bent her over counters and sat her on ledges. They licked each other in the shower and utilized both beds.

She had never experienced pleasure like she felt each time they touched, never imagined such staggering sensations existed. He could be incredibly gentle even while he overpowered her and commanded her, or like now, he could be uninhibited and wild.

Each time was different, new somehow, and their bond continued to strengthen. She could send her thoughts as well as hear his now and she treasured the intimacy.

Pleasure shot through her, sudden and powerful. She gasped, her core pulsing with an impending orgasm. "May I come, sir? Please! I can't wait."

Blood coursed through her ears, escalating from a rushing current to a thunderous roar. She arched and twisted, unable to hear his response or see beyond the gathering haze. Sensations blurred and curled, fading to black only to jar her back into stark awareness.

Pain stabbed down her spine, branching off into her arms and legs. She screamed, tossing her head and bucking beneath him.

Don't fight it, love. And don't be afraid. We'll ride this out together.

She felt him flow into her mind more prominently than he'd ever been before. He coaxed and soothed while he guided her, helping her center her mind so her body could accept the changes.

Changes. She was shifting!

Focus. Your body knows what to do. Don't let your mind get in the way.

She fought back her chaotic thoughts and the metamorphosis accelerated. Her muscles stretched and joints popped. She screamed again but a feline roar echoed in her ears.

Grant's arms wrapped around her neck, his warm body pressed along her back. She raised her head and saw her chest heaving as she panted for breath. Her coat had an ivory sheen, her chocolate brown stripes contrasting sharply with the pale hair. She'd done it. She'd actually morphed into a tiger.

Are you all right?

Finding their telepathic link took more concentration in her befuddled state, but she managed. *I think so. Will it always hurt so badly?*

I won't lie to you. There will always be pain, but you'll learn how to speed the transition and minimize the discomfort. Just rest now. I'm going to get you some water.

She was so weak remaining still was no problem. Every muscle in her body burned and her joints ached. If molecules

could feel pain, she was sure hers were throbbing. This looked so effortless when he did it. Why did she feel so wretched?

Sweetheart, your body has been torn apart and reassembled for the first time. It gets better. I promise. For a first transition, you did incredibly well.

He set a bowl of water down near her mouth and helped support her weight as she folded her legs beneath her. Every movement felt alien and labored. She leaned forward and lowered her head.

The water was cool against her tongue and the ringing began to fade from her ears. He stroked her neck and rubbed her bunched muscles, reassuring her as he eased the tension.

She closed her eyes and shifted her head to his thigh, too exhausted to think, much less move.

When the whirlwind approached the second time, she surrendered to it, allowing it to sweep her along with no resistance. The sensations were sharp and searing, but they receded much faster, making the experience far more bearable.

She rolled onto her back, her head in his lap. “Wow. That was horrible, yet amazing.”

He smiled, brushing the hair back from her damp face. “You are beautiful in any form.”

“I didn’t consciously shift back. Is that normal?”

“It might feel like the transformations are controlling you for the next few days, but you’ll gain a better understanding with each shift. In no time at all we’ll be prowling the forest together and shifting will feel as natural as breathing.” He gathered her in his arms, blankets and all, and set her on the bed. “I’m going to check the recording and make sure we captured what we needed.”

Understanding unfurled within her and she grabbed his hand. “We were having sex when I transformed. Oh shit, how do we release this file without revealing what triggered the shift?”

“I’ll edit the images as tastefully as I can, but there’s no way to disguise what we were doing.”

“It’s almost time for our evening meal. Let’s see what your grandfather thinks. I hope I didn’t screw up everything.”

Grant kissed her hand and urged her to lie down. “Rest. I’ll see if I can have a rough draft ready by the time he gets here.”

She was asleep when Darman arrived, but the rumble of their voices woke her. She dressed quickly, anxious to see what the director thought of the recording.

Darman didn’t seem surprised by the sequence of events and assured them it wouldn’t be a problem. “If anything, the sexual nature of the preshow will attract that many more viewers. Our hope is for this to go viral, so the more titillating the better.”

“We prepared interview segments beforehand,” Grant explained. “All I have to do is edit them in. I can have it ready by tomorrow.”

“That’s wonderful. Sheila left the infirmary this morning, so our excuse is wearing thin.”

“What happens now?” Sasha asked. “How do you avoid a backlash from DOMA?”

“General Hidaka will be out for blood as soon as this hits the public. I’ll have to disappear before he realizes what we’ve done.” Darman shrugged, but Sasha didn’t buy his nonchalance. This was his life’s work, the culmination of decades of dedication.

“That’s not an option.” She crossed her arms over her chest and widened her stance. “You’re the only ally the morphs have. It would be devastating to their cause if they lost you and your connections.”

“She’s right.” Grant stepped up beside her and slipped his arm around her waist. “This can’t lead back to you. We’re the ones who have to disappear.”

Darman shook his head, conflict clear in his dark eyes. “There’s nowhere for morphs to hide outside the colonies. DNA screenings are done on a routine basis.”

“So we won’t leave the colony,” Grant countered. “We’ll join the rebels. Dyauna has been after me for years.”

Sasha didn’t like the sound of that. “The rebels can have our allegiance, but Dyauna is shit out of luck!”

The men laughed and Grant hugged her close against his side. “Dyauna suspected you were my mate before I was ready to consider the possibility. She’s no threat to you. I promise.”

Embarrassed by her jealous reaction, she changed the subject. “Have the leopards found Izak?”

“Dyauna swears they’re still looking for him, but I think it’s more likely they’ve taken care of the problem and he will never be found.” Darman didn’t sound upset by the outcome.

“Good for her.” The vehemence in her tone made the men smile. “I saw what he did to Sheila. He deserved to die.”

Darman patted Grant on the back. “She’s already thinking like a cat.”

“We have to keep our plans clean and simple,” Grant said. “I’ll finish editing the file and then deactivate everything but the workstation. When you arrive with our food tomorrow, we’ll be gone. No explanation, no drama.”

“I’ll take care of the workstation after I retrieve the file, and then I can honestly tell Hidaka I came to lift the quarantine and you were gone.”

“Hidaka will still be suspicious as hell,” Sasha predicted.

“No doubt, but what he suspects and what he can prove are two different things.” A touch of amusement lightened Darman’s tone. Apparently it took more than the military to intimidate him. “If DOMA had the power to make me disappear, they would have used it a long time ago. Too many people with very deep pockets rely on my work.”

Grant paused, worry creasing his brow. “Are you sure you can trust your contacts? I’ll make sure there is nothing in the file that incriminates you, but this nameless distributor worries me.”

“I trust them implicitly. There is nothing for you to worry about, but things are going to get damn uncomfortable for DOMA as soon as this story starts spreading.”

“Then it’s settled. We’ll head out just before dawn and you take it from there.” Grant released Sasha long enough to hug his grandfather. The affection they shared was obvious and poignant.

Sasha offered Darman her hand, but he pulled her in for a quick hug as well. “You’re family now. Take care of this rascal for me.”

“You can count on it.”

After they devoured the food Darman brought them, they spent the next several hours preparing the file for public viewing. Grant used a combination of zoomed-in framing and strategic blurring to keep the scene from being pornographic.

Watching herself change over and over was nearly as amazing as having experienced it firsthand.

She was also moved by the emotions revealed in Grant's expressions and gestures. He'd been exhilarated, yet terrified for her safety. And once she had fully transformed, he'd been so careful with her, so tender. His love was undeniable.

Tears blurred her vision and emotion burned in her throat. She reached over and squeezed his hand. "Thanks for getting me through this. It was..."

He drew her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "What sort of male would I be if I didn't protect my mate?"

Two weeks ago she would have insisted she didn't need a man to protect her. But two weeks ago she'd been human, blindly following orders. She'd never thought of herself as complacent and gullible, yet that's exactly how she felt looking back now.

He powered down the workstation and pivoted in his chair, aligning their knees. "Life is going to be hard. Conditions in the rebel camp are pretty damn primitive."

"I've been in the military most of my life. I think I can handle it."

"Most of them don't bother with clothes." Challenge gleamed in his eyes, yet she detected a mischievous twinkle as well.

She stood and pushed her chair aside. "I'm not ashamed of my body." With deliberate slowness, she pulled her top off and let it fall to the floor. "Modesty is a human expectation and I am a felidae-morph." She wiggled out of her pants and stood before him naked.

Heat washed over Grant as he looked at his mate. She was perfect, sleek and leanly muscled, yet soft and rounded as a female was meant to be. Her spirit pleased and aroused him. He stood as well, shedding his suddenly cumbersome clothing.

“Reaching the rebel camp will be faster and easier if we travel as cats,” he told her. “Are you ready to try it again?”

Her gaze was just as bold as his, moving over his naked body with leisurely appreciation. She licked her lips and approached him, desire making her dark eyes shine. “If you’re asking, I’m ready to try almost anything.”

He chuckled. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

She put her hands on his shoulders and leaned in close, her lips nearly touching his. “I know you need to be in control, but I want to take you in my mouth and make you really hard.”

The hunger in her gaze had already accomplished her goal, but he wasn’t about to argue. “And then?”

“I want you on top of me, kissing me deeply while you move strong and steady inside me.”

He pressed his aching cock against her belly, half afraid this detailed description would rob him of the control needed to fulfill her desires.

“Then before you come, I want you to pull out and catch your breath. I’ll turn over and get on my hands and knees.” She paused to lick her lips, clearly enjoying the fact that she was driving him crazy. When she spoke again her tone was hushed and passion-roughened. “I want you to hold back my arms while you take me from behind, like I’ve seen so many times in my mind.”

He took a fistful of her hair and carefully drew her head back, gazing deep into her eyes. “There’ll be no surveillance this

time, no distractions. I'll claim you, taste you and fill you completely. I'm humbled by your trust, and I'll treasure you always."

Reaching down without breaking eye contact, he gently took her hand and led her into the bedroom. He wanted this to be perfect, a physical expression of the love surging between them. She was giving up so much to be with him, her career, life as she'd known it. He wanted to make the transition smooth and the destination worth the sacrifice.

Her lips parted beneath his, her mouth soft and welcoming as his tongue slid into her warmth. He kissed her deeply and opened his mind, allowing her to feel the full depths of his devotion. Her mind opened in response and he sensed her trust and tenderness, her strength and passion.

Their hands wandered freely, touching and enjoying. He never tired of her smooth skin or the way his body reacted to the silken texture. Her breasts felt warm and weighty in his hand, the nipples teasing his palm as he caressed her.

Before he could explore her nipples more fully, she separated their mouths and slipped to her knees. She cupped his balls with one hand and used the other to guide his cock to her waiting mouth. Velvet heat surrounded him and pleasure radiated out like rays off the sun.

Her lips were firm yet soft against his shaft. He rocked his hips, sliding in and out, lost in the blissful heat of her willing mouth. For a long time she remained passive, just letting him enjoy. He caressed her face and rolled her nipples, savoring the smoldering sensations, determined to make it last.

Then her clever tongue began to tease, swirling and flicking until he gasped with each rotation. His rhythm sped up and his

strokes deepened. His tip bumped the back of her throat with each long stroke.

She sucked him firmly as she pulled back, finally releasing him completely.

Cool air washed over his wet length and he groaned. "On the bed."

With a siren's smile, she obeyed. She lay on her back and parted her thighs, grasping the back of her knees to hold herself open. He knelt between her legs and gazed at her wet sex.

Unable to ignore the impulse, he bent and licked her folds. Her scent made him dizzy and demanding hunger ripped through him as her taste rolled across his tongue. He grasped her hips and raised her to his mouth, pushing deeper into the heart of her. So soft, so hot, so undeniably his!

He licked and sucked with greedy relish, thrilled by her gasps and cries. His tongue stabbed into her core while his top lip caressed her clit. She wiggled and twisted, lost in the building sensations.

Cream flowed from her core, soaking her folds. The more freely she surrendered, the more aggressive he became. He wanted to devour her, drive her to endless peaks of pleasure as he feasted on her silky cream. He shifted his mouth, focusing on her clit as he coated his fingers with her essence.

Sensing his darkening mood, she stilled. He carefully positioned his hand, two fingers at her opening. Then he flicked his tongue across her clit as he pushed his fingers inside her.

"Please, may I—"

Yes.

She came in deep spasms, arching into his mouth. Her inner muscles squeezed his fingers and her clit twitched against

his tongue. He prolonged the spasms with the firm swirl of his tongue around and across her throbbing nub.

While she floated in the sensual aftermath, he draped her legs over his arms and thrust his hard length into her core. Her hips canted so he could drive deeper. She raised her arms above her head and clasped her hands together as he began to move between her thighs.

Closing his eyes for a moment, he focused on the snug grip of her hot passage. Sensations swirled around him and flowed through him, gradually coalescing in his abdomen. All he had to do was release his stranglehold on his self-control and he'd go off like a volcano. But this was too important to be compromised by one selfish moment.

He pushed his full length into her and shifted her legs to his hips. Arching over her, he covered her mouth with his. *Taste your pleasure on my tongue and feel me deep inside you.*

I love this feeling. I think I could come just squeezing myself around you.

We'll find out, but not tonight.

Her lips parted and her tongue curled around his, the kiss taking on a life of its own.

Rocking back onto his knees, he made room between their bodies. He continued to kiss her, but his hands caressed her breasts and squeezed her nipples. Her inner muscles fluttered each time he tightened his fingers, but he stubbornly refused to move.

Why did you stop? Her mental voice sounded breathless and urgent.

I'm not coming until you're on your knees, and I'm flirting with disaster at the moment.

Then pull out until you regain control.

Not until you come again.

His fingers found her clit and helped her obey. She tore her mouth away at the last moment and cried out. Her inner walls rippled and she shuddered violently as the pleasure swept over her.

“Now comes the hard part,” she reminded him. “You have to pull out so I can turn over.”

Chapter Eight

Sasha's nails dug into her palms as Grant slowly separated their bodies. She felt hollow and incomplete without his fullness inside her. But this was only a pause, a momentary intermission. The best was yet to come. He would claim her, overwhelm what little remained of her uncertainty and fulfil her darkest fantasy.

Turning over onto her stomach, she folded her legs beneath her and rested her forearms against the bed. She missed seeing his face when they were like this, but it felt more natural, more fulfilling.

He caressed her back and hips, soothing and relaxing her. His fingers brushed against her folds and his throaty groan made her smile.

"I could spend all night just touching you. You're so damn soft."

"I'll let you sometime, but not tonight."

His hands settled on her hips, steadying her and keeping her from wiggling away. Then his tongue traced a tingling path from her clit to her opening. She clutched the bedding, loving the evocative slide of his tongue, yet needing so much more.

He repeated the trek over and over, teasing her clit then drawing the sensations to her empty passage. She wiggled helplessly and his fingers dug into her flesh.

Be still. Concentrate on the sensations. Let yourself feel.

She closed her eyes, imagining what he looked like bent over her, boldly preparing his mate for the next intimacy. He was her mate, the male with whom she would spend the rest of

her life. The thought was thrilling, yet intimidating. Could this sort of intensity really last that long?

His mouth left her and she moaned.

“From this point on you may come as often as you like. I don’t want either of us to hold back on any level.”

His words warmed her and helped her relax as he positioned himself to claim her. His hands grasped her hips, holding her steady as he drove inward. She pushed back against him, taking him as deep as possible.

Holding perfectly still with his entire length buried inside her, Grant stubbornly drove her toward another orgasm. He caressed her breasts and plucked on her nipples, his fingers in continual motions against her clit.

Sasha buried her face against the mattress and screamed in frustration. She needed him to move, wanted him thrusting deep inside her. But he controlled her pleasure. She needed to surrender to her mate.

Forcing aside the urge to buck and wiggle, she concentrated on his hands. Each caress was gentle, each stimulation careful, revealing his tenderness. He loved her, needed her to find pleasure in this surrender, not just be willing to submit.

Sensations collected beneath his swirling fingertips. She absorbed the pleasure, drawing it deeper into her body. Tingly heat passed along her core, gathering speed and intensity. She offered herself to the pleasure, open and ready as the wave crested, bathing her in euphoric light.

He grasped her elbows, drawing her arms back and pulling her upper body off the bed. Her hands weren’t bound, but he controlled her movements completely. He pulled back, not

quite out as he whispered, "You are mine and mine alone." Then he thrust forward hard, illustrating his claim.

She gasped then groaned as her core stretched around him. "I'm yours," she agreed. "And you are mine, forever and always."

He responded with actions rather than words, filling her again and again. His long, steady strokes kept pleasure ricocheting through her entire body. He held her at the perfect angle to maximize the slide and impact between his body and hers.

She came suddenly, the spasms sharp and fast. He growled and his pace sped, each drive going deeper than before. Unable to touch him with her hands, she reached for him with her mind, needing to feel his frenzy, letting it burn away the lingering remnants of her humanity.

He swept into her mind as he thrust into her body, hard, intense, and unrelenting. She reveled in his savagery. They were morphs, wild and free, ready for whatever life brought them.

She cried out and tossed her head, overcome by the emotional tempest. Pleasure burst beyond orgasm and her sluggish mind registered the significance. It was happening again. She was morphing into her tiger self.

He shifted with her this time and pleasure followed her through the change. His massive body pinned her to the bed as he thrust in sharp succession, then spilled his seed. He let out a triumphant roar, then withdrew from her trembling body and leaped to the floor.

Is this going to happen every time we make love?

The affection in his light blue gaze reassured her. *It might until you learn to control it, but that seemed much smoother. How do you feel?*

There was no cramping muscles, no burning joints, just the undeniable urge to run. *I feel amazing, but restless as hell.*

Then I say we run.

She pushed up from the rumpled blankets and carefully climbed off the bed. Her legs didn't even wobble. She was steady and strong. Her vision blurred a bit as she turned her head.

You'll get used to cat senses. We perceive things differently in tiger form than we do when we are in human form.

What about my gear?

You won't need it where we're going.

Before she could argue the point, he ran across the outer room and leaped through the large front window.

She took a deep breath and ran after him, easily clearing the window and landing in the yard.

Nicely done, but let's move. A second white tiger will draw too much attention. We need to disappear.

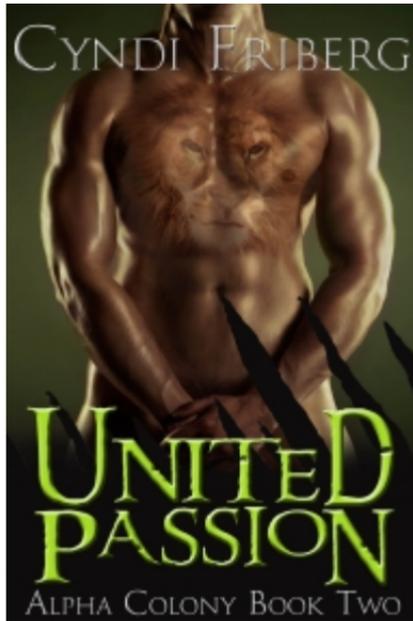
I'm ready. She sent conviction along with the thought. Their future might be uncertain right now, but they could overcome anything together.

Without a backward glance, she followed her mate into the forest.

Please Leave a Review

I swore I'd never do this, but here I go. If you enjoyed this book, could you please take a minute and write a review? Reviews have become an important way for readers to find new authors and to evaluate new books. My books sell well, but don't tend to receive a lot of reviews, so I'd really appreciate your help.

Thanks, Cyndi



As a Pride leader, Maddox knows unification is the only chance the cat-shifters have of surviving the harsh conditions at Alpha Colony. His reputation for ruthlessness is well known, so the other pride leaders quickly fall in line.

Convinced any form of cooperation is unacceptable, Dyauna and her followers are determined to defy their human captors at every turn. Still, the rest of the rebels will accept unification if Maddox can recruit Dyauna.

Their relationship has always been tempestuous, but he knows how to make her purr. Her radical ideals once drove them apart, and he can't let it happen again. He'll take her captive for a few days and focus entirely on her pleasure. Then she'll be forced to admit they are meant to be together, just like the cat-shifter clans.

About the Author

Anything-but-Ordinary is Cyndi's creed and her writing reflects her dedication to the concept. She writes in a variety of genres, but seems happiest in outer space. Her books frequently appear on Best Seller lists, and *Taken by Storm* was named Best Fantasy/Science Fiction Romance of the year by *Romance Reviews Today*.

She lives in Colorado with her high school sweetheart turned husband of many years. With a pampered cat curled on the corner of her desk, she dreams of fascinating words and larger than life adventures—and wouldn't have it any other way!

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Tainted Hearts

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