

Pret Ops

Infiltrator

Emma Ray Garrett

Changeling Press

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Pret Ops 3: Infiltrator

Emma Ray Garrett

"I know people you can't afford to know, Mr. President."

When mercenaries kidnap his daughter Charlie, the President turns to Lucia Malholland. Lucia turns to the Recondite Corps.

Charlie's famous for her unruly behavior, but getting kidnapped isn't exactly in her plans. Refusing to go down without a fight, Charlie manages to escape, only to find herself swooped up by a fiery-haired man who isn't quite human...

Brian O'Connor has been in the office too damn long. Rescuing the President's daughter from guerillas sounds like the perfect op: a little action, a little fresh air, an exotic locale. But somewhere in the midst of dodging bullets and fighting off mosquitoes the size of house cats, passion ignites between Brian and the independent Charlie. In fact, Charlie is messing up all of Brian's plans for a quick in and out, and she's coming perilously close to uncovering a secret he can't afford to share.

Chapter 1

"What do you mean you can't find her? Jesus, John, what the hell good are you!" President Jacob Thompson slammed his fist against the most famous desk in the United States of America.

"I'm sorry, Mr. President. We've done everything we can to locate Charlene." Secretary of Defense John Greenwald, Jacob's longtime friend and closest advisor, folded his hands in his lap and let the President rip him.

"Charlie, John. She hates Charlene." The President jerked his tie loose before rubbing his palms against his eyes in anger, frustration, but mostly despair. "I don't know what to do, John. I'm at my wit's end!"

"Stop blaming yourself, Jacob. You had no idea the Venezuelan group would go this far to get you to back their coup attempt."

"I should have, damn it." The President swiped a hand across the desk, knocking pens and papers to the floor. "I should have. And if we weren't so distant, I would have told her about them, made sure she was careful. Since Amelia died, Charlie and I have grown so far apart I don't know her anymore. We don't talk. And the media's only made it worse. She rarely takes my calls because she thinks I'm going to rant about her behavior. I can't blame her, either. I mean, look at this tripe!"

He motioned to the stack of major newspapers on the corner of his desk. Headlines like "Guess Who's Misplaced His Daughter Again" and "Wild Thing Thompson: Run Amok or Runaway?" boldly screamed what the nation thought of his daughter.

"Jacob, I don't know what you're going through, but I'm worried about her too. I've known Charlie since she was three." John walked to the President and placed a hand on his shoulder. "The situation isn't completely without hope. We know Charlie is

in South America. We also know she's in one of two places. The problem is, we can't get into those areas to look for her. The ground is too hostile."

"How is that hopeful, John? If we can't get to her, what good does any of this information do Charlie or me? I can't leave my only child to rot in some guerrilla camp, or worse, and I won't negotiate with these bastards. What am I supposed to do?"

"Since you've only talked with me about this, I assume you don't want the CIA or FBI involved."

"I want her back in one piece and I don't want to start a war. The CIA and FBI aren't an option. They already think Charlie's sudden departure could be connected to the Venezuelan guerillas. If she didn't have the ridiculous reputation she does, Director Fitz would have been more rabid about getting answers as to where she went and with whom."

"This situation is difficult, Jacob, but I might have a solution that --" A buzz from the President's intercom interrupted John.

"Sally, what is it? I'm busy here." Jacob rubbed a hand across his brow. He didn't mean to snap at his secretary, but his nerves were shot.

"I apologize, sir. Ms. Malholland is here to see you. She says it's urgent."

Jacob frowned at Greenwald.

"And she's early." John turned away from the President.

"What? What's Lucia Malholland doing here?"

"She's part of the solution. Let her in, Jacob."

Thompson looked at Greenwald hard. He set his jaw in a grim line. "Send her in, Sally."

Jacob straightened his tie and took his seat behind the desk. When Lucia Malholland entered, his heart kicked at the sight of her. She was beyond lovely. She'd pulled her honey-blond hair into the perfect French twist. Lucia's face was oval-shaped, emphasizing her large, gray eyes, bow mouth, and high cheekbones. She was curvaceous from bust to hips, with long legs and a slow stride, which compelled others to watch her move.

Lucia took a seat across from him. “Mr. President. I understand you have a situation that needs to be resolved.”

“And how do you know that, Lucia?” Malholland was a very wealthy, very well-connected woman. She had contacts most heads of state only wished they had.

“Please, Mr. President. We both know I can’t tell you that. Let me just say, I think I can help.”

“All right. How?”

“I know people.” Lucia settled her hands in her lap.

“So do I.”

“I know people you can’t afford to know, Mr. President.”

“The group she’s talking about is the solution, Jacob.” John, silent until now, met the President’s gaze. Worry, fear, and hope shone in his hazel gaze.

Jacob nodded and looked back to Malholland. “All right, then. What can this group do for me?”

The epitome of a diplomat, Malholland gave Jacob a small smile. He returned it, almost wanting to laugh.

“These people use an extensive network of contacts all over the globe to infiltrate places no one else can get into.”

“I can attest to their effectiveness.” Greenwald tapped his finger on the arm of his chair. “They’re extremely powerful. They can do things no one else can. Hell, I’m the Secretary of Defense and all I know is that the group could be a major super power if they weren’t so loyal to the States. They help when they’re needed, otherwise they keep to themselves.”

Thompson pinched the bridge of his nose. He couldn’t help the reservations he felt, or the curiosity. He wanted his daughter back, but everything he did carried the potential for devastating fallout. He looked from Lucia to John. “What’s this going to cost me? Who am I going to be indebted to for this help?”

Secretary Greenwald answered him. "Mr. President, I have two words for you. Plausible deniability. Don't ask questions if you don't want to have to testify to the answers later."

Lucia's breathy voice drew him from his warring thoughts. "So, Mr. President, is this a go?"

"Well..." The President hesitated. Hell, yes, he wanted her to contact this group.

"Yes or no? It isn't terribly difficult." Her tone was slightly haughty, as if she had better things to do.

Thompson's brows drew close with irritation. He opened his mouth to chastise her for her tone, but Greenwald cleared his throat, drawing his attention. A subtle shake of his head warned Thompson not to call Lucia out for her behavior.

"Yes." If there were consequences, he'd deal with them later. Right now, he wanted his baby girl safe at home.

"Good." Lucia rose from her chair and extended her hand to the President, who also rose.

"When will I hear from you?"

"You won't. It's been a pleasure."

He released her hand and gave a small smile.

Chapter 2

Charlie groaned, lifting a hand to her aching forehead. "What the hell have you gotten yourself into now?" The sickening pound in her skull didn't provide an answer.

Charlene Thompson, First Daughter, was stuck in a shit hole, somewhere near the equator based on the oppressive heat, with no idea who'd cracked her on the skull and brought her to this place. It was safe to assume it had to do with her father and/or politics, but beyond that...

The acrid smell of wood smoke and the sickly sweet stench of decomposing plants clogged her nostrils. Her skin felt grimy, sticky, where sweat had partially dried and mixed with the dirt of the floor beneath her. Charlie ached for a hot bath for about a half a second. *You can bathe when you're free.*

Weak sunlight drifted in through tiny, irregular holes cut high into the walls of the room. Her vision blurred and her stomach pitched, but Charlie choked down the bile. Blinking to clear her sight, she struggled to her feet. Her entire body protested each movement, but Charlie fought through the pain and staggered to the nearest wall.

She stood on weak legs, breathing slowly, and pressed her shoulder to the wall, completely focused on staying upright. She stayed there for what felt like hours but was probably only a few minutes. Finally, the thumping in her skull ebbed to a dull throb and the triple vision cleared to a muzzy, but coherent, single sight.

"Now what?" Charlie looked around the dimly lit space. A wooden door faced her, but she didn't see any handle or knob. "Great."

From outside she heard voices speaking, though she couldn't make out the words. The rapidity of the speakers' cadence reminded her of Spanish. Having grown up in New Mexico, and despite the situation she was in, the sound of the language comforted her.

The earthen room blocked out the dialogue. Thinking the door might offer better eavesdropping, Charlie straightened from the wall and made her way toward it. Getting there took all the strength she'd mustered and she slipped to the floor beside the rickety entrance. The voices outside weren't much clearer, but the depth of the tones suggested the speakers were probably male. She caught a word here or there, but three she heard distinctly gave her hope. *Rio Orinoco* and *transportamos*. The first words signified the Orinoco River, in northeast Venezuela, and the second suggested they were transporting something.

"Probably me." Knowing where she was gave Charlie a sense of control. She'd never been to continental Venezuela, but she'd enjoyed the islands off the coast more than once.

She forced her sore brain to think about her college geography. The Orinoco River was one of the longest in South America. Her memory wasn't the best, but she hoped they were in the Lower Orinoco, near the delta and the Atlantic Ocean. Based on the humidity, it was quite likely. It was possible she was somewhere in the plentiful mangrove forests, the swamps, of the country.

Charlie held onto her hope. Even if she were in the middle of a swamp, she'd rather escape and take her chances with Mother Nature than stay here and wait. Tensions between the States and Venezuela hadn't been the best for more than twenty years. However, a lot of the country was urbanized. If she could escape, and make her way out of the jungle, if that's where she was, she had a good chance of getting home.

The voices outside grew louder, approaching footsteps launching her heart into her throat. She couldn't afford to let her captors know she was awake. Without thinking, Charlie scabbled away from the door, flopping onto the floor and closing her eyes. Something scraped against the wood and the door opened.

Though her blood pounded, Charlie stilled her breathing to soft, shallow expulsions and inhalations. She rolled her eyes beneath her lids, the action stilling any fluttering that might give away her cognizant state. The footsteps moved closer and she

felt a hard, round object pressing into her back. She didn't react and her visitor shoved at her deeper.

When she remained unresponsive, he must have been satisfied. With a grunt, he shuffled away, the sound of rubber soles on dirt sending relief surging through her body. The door closed with a squeak and a thump and Charlie had to stifle a sob. She had no doubt the man had nudged her with a gun.

"What have you done, Dad?" Anger at her father gave her strength, but Charlie couldn't sustain it. She needed to formulate a plan of escape. Whether her father was involved or not, Charlie knew it was up to her to get free. Waiting on the US government for a rescue wasn't an option.

She got up slowly and crawled back to the door. She pressed her ear to it, listening, learning. More and more words became clear, and Charlie felt the beginnings of a plan form.

Chapter 3

“You only have one chance, Charlie, so you better get it right.”

It had taken her two days to come up with a viable strategy to get free. She’d been able to fake unconsciousness for about a day, but the men holding her had brought smelling salts yesterday afternoon. Playing loopy, she’d managed with her sloppy Spanish, to figure out why they kidnapped her.

Her father refused to back the group’s coup. Hoping to sway his decision, the rebel group had sent a small unit to Miami, intent on capturing Charlie. They’d found her and taken her. The group reasoned that if the President wanted her to live, he’d cave. Obviously, they didn’t understand American politics as well as they thought. Even if her dad wanted to negotiate, there was no way the rest of Washington would allow it.

She’d tried, in muddled Spanish, to tell them as much. Charlie’s face still ached where the leader had backhanded her before throwing her into the room once more. He’d been enraged by her comments. Before he’d left her, the leader whispered in harsh, choppy English that she’d better hope her father changed his mind in the next thirty-six hours. Otherwise, all President Thompson would see of his daughter again was her head.

Charlie thought his threat was a little extreme, but it wasn’t as if she had a lot of experience with armed, Spanish-speaking militia groups. The guy was probably blowing hot air, but the semi-automatic rifles he and the others carried sure looked real. And she really didn’t want to stick around and see if the guerrilla would keep his word.

It was the middle of the night. The sounds of animals and insects hung in the damp air, as if the humidity was too thick to let them dissipate. The men had a small fire going outside, the snap and crackle of wood soothing her in its way, despite the

horrid circumstances. Nearly a day had passed since the man had put her back in the room and Charlie was reasonably sure someone would come to bring her water soon. It wouldn't do for her to die before the deadline.

She'd paid close attention when they'd dragged her outside the previous day. They were in a small encampment, most likely an abandoned village. Her building sat on the edge of the tree line. There were about twenty men in the camp, though none of them seemed particularly alert.

Charlie snorted softly to herself. Apparently, her captors read too many American newspapers. The leader seemed to have taken her slightly slurred speech and roaming gaze as a sign of terror. He didn't think the "party-girl" President's daughter would be much trouble. Well, he was in for a shock. The media didn't know shit about Charlene Amelia Thompson.

Footsteps sounded outside the door. Every thought but escape fled Charlie's mind as she waited for opportunity to knock. When the door opened, her visitor's flashlight swept the room. The fact that the man carried a light was odd, but Charlie dismissed the thought. She held still, behind the door, and waited for him to come further inside.

The light of the beam seemed muted, but it illuminated the room clearly enough that Charlie could see the figure step in. When the metallic stem of the flashlight, gripped in a gloved hand, caught her gaze, she attacked. Slamming her body against the door, she surprised him. He stumbled and dropped the light.

Charlie swooped down, grabbing her weapon. The man was back on his feet, his body between her and the exit. She turned the light directly into his face, her mind registering bright, orange hair and pale skin. She hadn't seen any light-skinned guerillas. Shoving away the curiosity her visitor roused, she aimed the strong light straight into his eyes, joyous when he staggered back, throwing his hands up to protect his face.

Her opening presented itself. Charlie killed the flashlight and surged past him, grabbing the door and launching herself out of the building. She heard him curse, but

she didn't look back. She ran headlong and recklessly into the humid growth behind her cell. She had a flashlight, eight years of camping experience as a child, and determination. She was getting home.

* * *

"For fuck's sake." Brian O'Connor scrubbed his palms over his head and cursed softly.

He'd deployed the last of his decoys before entering camp. The mage-lights wouldn't keep the guerrillas distracted for long. When they returned and found six of their men incapacitated, this whole op could go to hell.

"For fuck's sake," he repeated. Blinking the last of the flash burn from his eyes, Brian stilled his breathing and listened intently. The rustling of plants ricocheted through the night. The President's daughter was fast, but she wasn't quiet.

Angry voices neared and Brian clenched his teeth. Stepping from the building, he took a quick sweep of the area. Armed men filed into the encampment. They shouted at each other, motioning to their downed comrades. Brian shook his head. He had to get out before they spotted him. He had no choice but to follow Charlene Thompson into the jungle and pray he got to her before they did.

Slipping from the building, Brian kept to the shadows.

"Intruso!"

"For fuck's sake." Brian didn't look behind him.

He thrust himself into the forest, moving between vines and small trees. Brian placed each step to make as little noise as possible, but the woman wasn't being nearly as careful. He tapped into his power, causing a stifling breeze to sweep through the flora, soft at first, then gaining strength. Hopefully, the wind would cover the sound of his footfalls, and Ms. Thompson's. The branches shook overhead, leaves rustling loudly, as Brian made his way between the trunks.

The stirring air startled the birds. The tree sitters sent up a cacophony of calls into the night, each song or screech echoing back into itself. With all the noise, Brian couldn't decipher which direction the woman had headed. He quickened his stride, the

calls from the weapon-toting men behind him growing close. Out of options, Brian slipped behind the largest tree around him and pressed his magic into the earth.

His elemental power coursed through the living wood, down through its roots, and out into the humid soil of the jungle. His gift unfurled like vines, twining through the ground, searching out the tiniest vibration of movement. This talent was one of the most precious in Brian's arsenal. It'd saved his life and more too often to count.

Tiny tremors flicked across his magic. None of them was hers. His profile said she was five seven and one forty-five. Whatever set off his magic was less than a tenth that weight. A strong shudder pulled at his mind. The movement was ahead of him by about a click.

"Gotcha," he whispered to himself. Brian tuned into the magic briefly, making sure no guerrillas were in the immediate area, before pulling away from the tree.

With the wind at his back and the night stirred to life, Brian covered the distance between himself and Charlene quickly. Nearing the area his magic pointed out, his senses went on alert. He couldn't yell out her name without giving away their position. He had to find and subdue her without alerting those chasing them.

He reached into the satchel at his back, feeling for the tracking potion. His fingers slid over each vial, a tiny zing of magic identifying them. He found the one he wanted. Moving carefully, he pulled it from the bag and popped its stopper with his thumb. Brewed specifically to locate Charlene, the concoction set about accomplishing the task as soon as the cork was free. Her every footstep and palm print bloomed into bright blue mage-sight beacons.

Brian followed her trail to a massive, gnarly tree. Her prints were all around it, but the sheer girth of it blocked his sight. He figured she was hiding behind it, but the shadows of the jungle swallowed nearly every bit of light. *And she has the damn flashlight.*

He circled to the left of the tree, laying his palm against it, feeling for her movement. He felt the sharp thrum almost too late.

"Bastard!" Her harsh whisper came a moment before impact.

Brian turned his body to the side, the primitive part of him responding to a blow that hadn't yet landed. The flashlight slammed into his hip, pain ricocheting up and down his right side. Though muffled, a shout of pain sounded like a loud report in his ears. Instinctively, Brian grabbed his wounded hip, sharp plastic and metal bits scraping against his palm.

He spun in a jerky circle, his body following the kinetic energy of motion. The whizzing sound of metal through the air gave him more time to react. His mind closed itself off from pain and his body circled the tree. The sound of metal connecting with wood ricocheted through the night, awakening the jungle around them. Animals burst into cries, birds took flight, and Brian finally came up behind Charlene Thompson.

She sensed him, her body tensed to flee. He couldn't allow that. With a sharp, downward slice of his hand, the President's daughter fell at his feet, unconscious. A tiny part of him grimaced at his actions, but her attack left them vulnerable. Brian called to air, using the powerful element to lift Charlene's limp body from the ground. His hip screamed in agony as he positioned her over his shoulder.

Brian looked around him, the sweeping beams of searchlights much too close for comfort. He dipped his fingers into his satchel once more, pinching one of the healing potions from its sheath. He opened the top and choked down the vile brew, returning the empty vial to the pouch.

Charlene shifted on his shoulder, a soft moan slipping from her throat. Brian took a deep breath and started jogging. He had to find them sanctuary. And he had to find out just how screwed they were.

Chapter 4

The heave of her stomach rolled Charlene to the side. No food for two days meant her belly was empty, but she gagged and dry heaved until it felt like her eyes would explode from her head.

"Here, drink this. It'll help." The voice was low and had an odd rhythm.

If her brain were clearer, she might have placed the accent. At the mention of putting anything into her mouth, however, the urge to throw up increased. She moaned and tried to shake her head. Dizziness assaulted her senses, threatening to send her back into unconsciousness.

"Either you drink it, or I pinch your nose and force it down your throat. Drink."

A small glass circle pressed to her mouth and a large, warm hand cupped the back of her neck. Charlie parted her lips to protest and liquid flooded into her mouth. It was spicy and tasted awful. She didn't want to swallow; for all she knew it was poison. *Who cares? Either it'll help or it'll kill you. If the pain in your skull is anything to go on, you might be looking at dying anyway.* Inner logic aside, Charlie's fear choked her.

When the liquid hit the back of her throat, she gagged again and coughed, trying to expel the fluid. But it didn't spew back on her captor. In fact, she never felt it slide down her throat or hit her stomach. Instead, a sensation like pop-rocks in cola jolted from her mouth, to her head, and down through her body. Tiny explosions, made up of a fizzling, snap-crackle-pop of chaotic noise, echoed in her ears.

Charlie swallowed hard. Her entire body felt like a giant ball of static electricity. A humming rose in her ears and the man turned her to lie on her back, his palm still cradling her head. Fireworks glittered behind her closed lids and then, as quickly as they started, the crazy sounds and sensations faded away.

Charlie stayed still, her mind grasping for a logical explanation for what had happened. And then she realized her nausea was gone, her head calm and pain free. Even the ache of her body and her hunger disappeared.

"You'll be fine." The man released her neck and moved away.

Charlie sat up slowly. The faint rays of dawn struggled to break through the green canopy high above them. She tested her arms and legs, surprised to find everything working normally. Truthfully, Charlie thought she felt better than normal. Energy filled her muscles as if she'd had the best night's sleep.

"What did you give me?" Her throat was dry, making her voice crack.

"A homeopathic remedy."

He didn't elaborate further and Charlie wasn't interested in the answer anyway. Instead, she looked around. They were in a small opening in the earth, most likely beneath a massive tree. Roots and tendrils writhed through the dirt, covering the space above and below her position.

It was damp in their hiding spot and a shiver danced across Charlie's body. "I'm cold. Do you think we could have a fire?"

The man turned to face her, a look of exasperation on his face. "No, Ms. Thompson."

"Okay." Charlie drew out the word.

The man sighed. "Unless you want to go back to the guerrillas, it's best we do as little as possible to draw their attention."

"Go back? You mean you aren't one of them? Then who are you?"

"I'm the guy who was supposed to come in, rescue you, and get the hell out. But thanks to your assault, my hopes for a quick in and out are blown to shite."

"Shite?"

"It's a British Island thing. Don't tell me the daughter of the President hasn't ever met an Irishman before?"

His accent was strong and Charlie'd been wavering between Irish and Scottish. With his ginger hair and lightly freckled skin, she'd been pretty sure he was Irish. "I don't have a talent for dialects, Mister..."

"O'Connor. Brian O'Connor, at your service, Charlene."

Crouched low though he was, he managed a mocking bow. Charlie pursed her lips. "Charlie. I hate Charlene." He gave a nod, but she wasn't appeased. Brian O'Connor had smart-ass written all over him. "So, Mr. O'Connor, if you're here to rescue me, why are we hiding under a tree?"

"Because you destroyed my radio when you attacked me with the flashlight."

"Okay. So, what do we do now?" Charlie wasn't sure if she believed O'Connor's story about being her rescue, but at this point, he was the lesser of two evils.

"You get on your feet and we move out." Brian eased his way from beneath the tree, one hand motioning for Charlie. She followed, her feet scraping against dirt and plant matter. "Be quiet. You're making too damn much noise." He didn't turn to look at her as he issued his whispered command.

Charlie clenched her jaw and took a deep breath. She didn't think her movements had been that loud. Grumbling under her breath, she shifted her weight slowly, balancing on her hands as she moved each foot. She stopped a few inches from him when he threw his left arm up. He held his fist closed in the universal gesture to hold.

As close as she was, she noticed the freckles dotting the back of his neck and the tension binding his shoulders. She watched him squint his eyes, peering into the dense flora around them. He slid himself completely into the open, his movement making no sound.

Without warning, he spun around, grabbing her upper arm and jerking her to her feet. "Damn jaguars. Run, Charlie."

"What?" She tried to whisper, but her voice squeaked.

Brian didn't answer her. Instead, he broke into a flat out run, dragging her behind him. Charlie stumbled and he tightened his hold, but didn't slow down. Their

headlong rush left destroyed plants in their wake, but for all of his caution about being noisy earlier, he didn't seem concerned now.

Gasping for breath, fighting to keep up with his pace, Charlie recalled what he'd said. "Did... you... say... jaguars?" Lungs heaving, throat burning, she strained to hear his answer over the pounding blood in her ears.

"Of course there'd be shifters. 'This will be a simple op, Brian. In and out.' I'll strangle Lucia if I see her again. Come on, we have to get to the river. I have a boat there. I hope."

His response completely confused her, but it sounded like an affirmative. She got her feet under her and pumped her legs as fast as she could, matching him step for step. A loud, predatory scream exploded in the jungle behind them and Charlie jerked her arm free. *A cat will not eat me. I will not be eaten by a cat.* She chanted the mantra repeatedly in her head, panic and terror pushing her to pass Brian, even when her lungs and heart threatened to seize from overwork.

"Keep going. Straight ahead!" His voice sounded faint, but she could still hear his footfalls.

Charlie threw her arms in front of her face, protecting herself from the thick plants. She strained to hear the rush of water, sounds of civilization, anything to tell her she was close to her target. She burst from the jungle, onto the muddy shores of the river, running for all she was worth. One of her cheap flip-flops caught on a small stone and she fell to her knees.

Jesus, Charlie. You make it all the way through the jungle and you trip over a rock now. Scrambling to her feet, she spun around, looking behind her for Brian or a big cat. She saw neither. Raising a hand to clutch her throat, Charlie realized her hands were covered in mud. An idea formed. Falling back to the wet earth, she grabbed handfuls of muck and began covering all of her exposed skin.

A loud pop startled a screech from her. She jumped to her feet, eyes skimming the surrounding area for a place to hide. The crash of running feet preceded Brian's

emergence from the jungle. He took one look at her and stopped dead. "What the hell are you doing?" He bellowed the question, throwing his arms wide.

"What do you mean?"

"For fuck's sake, woman, get in the damned boat!" Brian sprinted for the small rubber boat. Another growl/scream echoed from the jungle and Charlie took off after him.

He had the boat clear of the bank and the motor started by the time she reached him. He grabbed her hand and pulled her in, tossing her to the floor of it before revving the engine, sending them speeding down the channel. Charlie crawled to the front of the boat and gripped the sides.

* * *

They rode in silence for a while, though time seemed to have no meaning for Charlie. Brian imagined she was as far out of her element as a honeybee in Antarctica. When he cut the engine, she stirred and sat up. She shivered hard, wrapping her arms around herself, trying to still the trembles shaking her body.

Her body had barely stopped quivering when she started scratching at her skin. The mire she'd coated herself with had begun to dry. Brian smothered a smile while he watched her lean over the side of the boat, trying to rinse her arms off.

"What the hell were you doing playing in the mud?" His question seemed loud in the silence and she gasped, surprised.

She withdrew her arms from the water and turned to face him. Without meeting his gaze, she answered as she picked at the bits of dirt stuck to her skin. "You said jaguars were after us, didn't you?"

Brian hesitated for a moment. "Yeah."

"Well, I was trying to conceal myself. You know, like in that alien hunter movie."

Brian's jaw dropped. He stared at her agog. He tried, he really did, but laughter bubbled from his open mouth. "You were --" Chortles broke his speech. He tried again. "You were trying to hide yourself?"

Charlie's temper flared. "What? Why are you laughing?" Her indignation demanded an answer.

"The guy was rolling in the mud in that movie to conceal his body heat. Jaguars don't have the ability to detect body heat!" His blue eyes sparkled with mirth as he continued to laugh uproariously.

Charlie narrowed her eyes at him. "Hardy har har. I'm so glad you find it funny. I panicked. I didn't want to get eaten and you were nowhere to be seen." She fumed while he got control of himself.

Brian took pity on her. He opened his bag and withdrew a T-shirt. He dipped it into the water, and then handed it to her. "Here."

Charlie snatched the damp cloth from his hand and began rubbing the semi-caked dirt from her face and neck. Her skin heated with embarrassment. "Thanks." She didn't really mean it, but years as a politician's child had taught her manners.

"When you're done, you can rinse it off and put it on. It'll help keep you cool."

It was time to find a safe haven. Brian didn't think he could fix the radio, but he had to try. There was a Lycan Class Guardian submarine off the coast of Trinidad, just waiting for him to call them for evac. If he couldn't fix the radio, *his* rescue wouldn't know where to pick them up, unless he used magic. The Corps first rule was to avoid exposing humans to their secret at all costs. Brian figured the President's daughter was included in that directive.

His only option without the radio was magic. Not a little magic, no, he'd need a major spell of calling. There was no way he could hide working an actual enchantment from Charlie, unless he knocked her out. Considering the battering her head had taken, he couldn't do that without chancing serious complications. The healing potion worked, thankfully, but her skull was still repairing itself, even if she didn't realize it.

Up ahead, a small inlet drew his gaze. He cut the engine again and took a paddle from the boat's floor. They were getting deeper and deeper into the mangrove forests. Using the motor was dangerous. The many roots and limbs beneath the water would

tear it apart. His senses on alert, he steered them into the shallow waterway, into the deep cover.

He looked at her again, her mud-streaked face reinvigorating his sense of humor. So far, Charlie Thompson had been nothing like he'd expected. She was tenacious, brave, a bit of a wildcat. Through the craziness of the situation, she hadn't complained and she'd kept her fear hidden. He respected the woman and he hadn't expected to, considering her reputation.

He grinned at himself. He hadn't expected to find her half as attractive as he did either. About three steps after he'd slung her over his shoulder, he'd been battling an erection. Charlie was exactly his type of woman, physically at least. A fantastic heart-shaped ass, full breasts, and a soft belly. She wasn't full figured or a toothpick. She was a lovely, regular woman and Brian found that immensely appealing.

Charlie's eyes were a bright green, her slim nose tilted haughtily at the tip. She had soft, brown hair cut in a style that framed her face, falling just below her chin. Full lips, a stubborn chin, and he suspected a smart mouth when she wasn't in such stressful surroundings, made Ms. Thompson just about perfect. Exactly what he didn't need. His libido had no place in this rescue. More than that, they had zero chance of a lasting relationship. She wasn't People and she wasn't Corps. She was human.

The daughter of a very powerful human, something Brian had to keep in mind. One didn't have a one-night stand with the President's daughter. He was tired of meaningless sex with women he wouldn't see again. He didn't know if he was ready to settle down, in fact he was pretty sure he wasn't, but he did want to have the same partner for more than a few tussles in the hay.

He'd taken this op out of boredom. When Lucia had asked him, he'd jumped at the chance. Get out of the office, see an exotic locale, and see some action of a military kind? Hell, yeah. He'd joined the Orphic Class to put his mage skills to good use. And he enjoyed his life. But his branch weren't the first strikers.

Not that they didn't see action, just not what Brian had thought he'd see when he joined. And since taking his command, he'd seen fewer and fewer field operations and

more paperwork than he ever imagined. Being stuck in an office, large though it was, wasn't his idea of soldiering.

Lucia said she wanted him because he was a mage. Considering the op, Brian figured there was more to it than that, but he hadn't questioned her. Now, looking at his "captive," he wondered at Lucia's reasons for picking him.

The boat bumped over something in the water, pulling him from his thoughts. Looking around, he saw a small area of raised earth. Greenery covered nearly every bit of the mound, the perfect camouflage. Nodding to himself, he paddled the boat toward the mound of dirt. It would do as camp for now. If he couldn't get the radio fixed, he'd have to look for something else. Until then, they needed a place to stretch their legs.

He smiled broadly. It was a good day.

* * *

Charlie looked at Brian from beneath her eyelashes. A wide smile curved his lips and crinkled the fine lines at the corners of his eyes. He had a masculine face completely lacking any of the prettiness she normally saw. Brian O'Connor looked like a rugged, sexy everyman. She couldn't recall exactly, but he hadn't seemed overly tall. In fact, he'd seemed a bit on the stocky side.

He had on strange military fatigues in a sort of snow-camo pattern, she thought, which set off his vivid, blue eyes.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why are you wearing gray camo in the jungle? Shouldn't it be green or something? I mean, if you're really who you say you are." She quirked a brow at him, curious what he'd say.

His eyes widened a bit. He looked down at his fatigues, then back at her. "Let me say I hope we aren't in here long enough for my clothes to be a problem. Besides, you're in a rather eye catching outfit yourself." His bright blue eyes crinkled at the corners. He seemed to be constantly smiling, true warmth and good humor emanating from his entire body.

And what a body it was. His shoulders were well defined, muscles bulging and rippling as he moved about the small boat. Brian's hands weren't large or small, but the long fingers made her think he was good with them. His thighs captured her gaze. They were noticeably thick in his slacks, muscular and strong. Those legs could carry a lot of weight.

Charlie looked back at his face. His hair was a lighter orange-red than she'd initially thought. Though she'd never found it attractive before, on Brian it looked good. Though short, his hair hinted at waviness, making her wonder if it was naturally curly. A soft dusting of freckles across his cheeks and over his nose gave him a strange dichotomy of cute versus masculine.

He turned the boat out of the main channel and she turned to look at where they were going. *More trees, water, and bugs. Fantastic.* She grumbled under her breath and looked back at Brian. He winked at her. Charlie raised a brow at him and looked away. A hundred comments flitted through her mind, but she didn't say a word. Instead, she dipped the shirt into the water and rinsed it. He chuckled softly. She ignored him.

Chapter 5

"For fuck's sake!" Brian tossed the radio to the ground. It was totally bugged. Raking a rough palm over his face, he fumbled for an idea that wouldn't expose his talents to Charlie. And came up with nothing.

"What's the matter?" She'd rinsed all the mud from her body and put the T-shirt on. It clung to her shape, distracting him.

"The radio is rubbish." He glared at her.

"I'm not about to feel guilty. If you'd identified yourself when you came into that room, maybe I wouldn't have knocked you down. Then you wouldn't have chased me." She smacked at a mosquito and waved her hand in front of her face, trying to disperse the pests.

"Bloody hell. We're going to have to get to a village, a town. Somewhere I can use a radio or phone. I can't get us extracted without relaying coordinates." It was a white lie of sorts, but it was his only other option. He'd looked over the maps of the area he had in the satchel. The new plan had a slim chance of success, but he had to attempt it.

"Damn it!" She swatted at another bug. "What the hell are you using to keep them away? I'm allergic to mosquitoes and they're eating me alive!"

"Everyone is allergic to mosquitoes." She growled at him. Despite his frustration, he grinned. He'd used magic to repel the bugs. She glared at his smile, then winced when another bloodsucker bit her. Brian frowned and moved to her side. Large, red welts dotted her skin. The bites were more irritated than they should have been.

"What the hell?" He grabbed her left arm, turning it in his hands. "Stop scratching them."

"I'm not scratching them. This is what happens when mosquitoes bite me." Charlie jerked her arm free.

"You're allergic to mosquitoes!"

"That's what I just said!" She put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

Brian turned around and stalked to his bag. After a second or two of riffling, he returned with a vial in his hand.

"What?" She eyed his offering with skepticism.

"Drink this."

"What is it?" Her entire body was on fire with the intense need to scratch.

He clenched his jaw, an irritated growl rumbling in his chest. "A repellant. Drink it."

"Don't you have anything other than tonics in that bag of tricks? Why the hell would you come on a rescue mission without back up, personal and technological?" Talking helped her ignore the pain of each hive begging to be scratched.

"This trip was supposed to take less than a day. Damn it, Charlie, drink!" He thrust the glass tube at her. Brian was ready to throttle her if she asked another question he couldn't answer.

"Fine, sheesh." She uncorked the top and chugged the liquid. It tasted vaguely of peppermint. The weird tingly sensation from the last brew he'd given her returned, though this time muted. And cold. She shivered hard before handing him back the tube.

He grabbed the bag from the ground, slinging it over his shoulder as he made his way back to the boat. Charlie barely noticed. She watched the welts on her hands and arms fade away. Utterly confused by her miraculous cure, she didn't notice for a few minutes that the cloud of bugs had disappeared.

"What the hell is that stuff? Some kind of magic potion?"

"Actually, it is." He tossed the satchel into the boat, before pushing it off the small dirt mound and back into the water.

"Seriously, where can I get this stuff?"

"You can't. It's magic."

“Okay, magic man. Got a tube of insta-wings in that pack?” A giggle tickled her lips.

With the utmost sincerity, he turned to her. “Damn, I wish I’d thought of that.”

* * *

He hated to leave the small island he’d found. But when he’d checked the magical sensor net, the shifters they’d barely outrun before were within five kilometers of the inlet. It pissed him off that no one had bothered to inform him of the possibility of metamorphs. Intel should have known about them, even if they were freelance.

So far, his only advantage against them was his elemental bond with Mother Earth. Thanks to his gifts, he’d been able to verify the type of shifter. The jungle knew all its animals, so he did too. Brian could put up a viable defense against the jaguar-men tracking them. And right now, the defense consisted of keeping the boat moving.

He’d been paddling for several hours. Sweat rolled down his face and neck as the sun passed the midpoint of its journey through the sky. After a few more strokes, he pulled the paddle in and reached for his bag. He had to find a place to make camp.

Traveling in the heat of the day was risky since it made spotting them much easier. Not that night would give them much of an advantage. Jaguar shifters might not be able to detect body heat, but they had excellent night vision. Pulling his compass and a map from the satchel, he got their bearings and began plotting a path to safe haven.

As he searched the map, he resigned himself to the situation. There simply weren’t any viable villages close enough to get to without another confrontation with the guerrillas. He was going to have to use magic. If the guerrillas were only human, he’d have made the attempt. The odds would have been in his favor.

But it wasn’t just men after Charlie. His mind made up, Brian located a spot on the map. He spared Charlie a glance. She was sleeping. Figuring it was safe, he cast a small spell to protect her from the sun before picking up the paddle.

The only thing left to determine was what spell to use, and how to work the magic so Charlie’s exposure, and subsequent curiosity, was minimal.

Chapter 6

"I'm thirsty." Actually, she was parched. Her saliva had become pasty, and she had the beginnings of a headache.

"I'm sorry. Give me a minute."

Brian was fiddling with something a few feet from the cave mouth. She had no idea how he'd found the place, but she was glad to be off the waterway and on solid ground again. Satisfied with whatever he was doing, he grabbed his bag and loped out of sight, down to the water she assumed.

Her belly growled, but Charlie wasn't going to complain. Somewhere between laughing at her for rolling in mud and being concerned over her nasty bites, she'd believed his story. The lack of back up, her worries over whom he really worked for had disappeared. She trusted Brian. Snorting softly to herself, she appreciated the irony of trusting any man.

Thinking back over the last few years, it was a wonder she hadn't become totally paranoid. Before her mother died from ovarian cancer, Amelia Thompson had made Charlie promise to be the best politician's child she could. Not that she'd been a problem, but Charlie'd had a few spats at school that had ended up in the papers. Honestly, nothing she'd done was abnormal, but being a governor's kid made anything she did fodder for the media.

After her mother's passing, Charlie had thrown herself into taking care of her dad. She'd minded her p's and q's, toed the line, and been exemplary. When her dad won the White House, Charlie had made him promise not to run for reelection. More than a decade in the public spotlight had taken its toll. She didn't want to be perfect; she just wanted to be Charlie.

Why she'd believed his promise the last time, when he'd broken so many in the past, Charlie didn't know. To be fair, her father didn't want to break his word, in fact was regretful each time. But politics being what they are, when push came to shove, the government took precedence over dance recitals, vacations, and school plays. Regardless, she'd believed him when he'd said he wouldn't run again.

When he'd announced his choice to run for a second term, Charlie was furious. She told him flat out she wasn't playing perfection anymore. She'd graduated from college with a double degree in political science and resource management/sustainable development. Unsure exactly what she wanted to do with her degree, she'd taken a job in a bookstore and set about living her life.

She never did anything terribly crazy. Okay, well there was that one time involving table dances and Jello shots. But really, she didn't act like a hellion, no matter what the media implied. In fact, she behaved better than most because even though she didn't want to, she had to take into consideration who she was.

And being Charlene Thompson made it hard to date too. Every man who'd shown her interest had an ulterior motive. All of them but one and Charlie thought maybe that was why she trusted Brian O'Connor. He treated her like a person, not like an opportunity for connections or notoriety.

Speak of the devil.

Brian popped his head from the nearby cover. "Hungry?"

His accent was extremely sexy and for a second Charlie wanted to say "not for food." She blushed softly at her thoughts. "Yeah."

"Good. I've brought food." He handed her a canteen before sitting down close to her. Brian opened his bag, pulling a pouch from inside.

Charlie looked at the cooked meat hesitantly and lifted a hand toward a small piece. "What is --"

He interrupted her, sticking a chunk between her parted lips. "Don't ask and I won't have to tell you. Trust me, it tastes good and you need food."

Charlie gave him an irritated look. The smoky flavor of the meat hit her taste buds and she forgot her annoyance. "This *is* good."

Brian smiled brightly at her. A flicker of mischief fired in his beautiful blue eyes and Charlie snorted. She snatched a couple more bits of food and took a long drink of water. "Don't even think it."

"What?" He tried for an innocent expression. It wasn't convincing.

"I don't want to know what we're eating now." He laughed heartily. The sound of it made Charlie feel warm and safe.

Maybe that was why she started bawling. She didn't really know. One minute she was feeling a little playful and the next she was coming apart at the seams. She buried her face in her hands, drew her legs up, and bit her lip to keep the sobs quiet. Strong, warm arms encircled her and Charlie struggled not to cry harder.

Brian moved behind her, pulling Charlie back against his chest, rubbing a hand up and down her back. He wasn't great with weeping women, but he did the best he could to soothe her. Truthfully, he'd expected this hours ago. Still, hearing her cry tore at him. Smoothing a hand over her head, he pressed her close, hugging her tight.

She didn't cry for long. When he made to move away, she grabbed his arms. He sighed and tightened his hold. They sat that way for a while. Then Charlie started wiggling. And Brian's body sat up and took notice.

She shifted for the sixth or seventh time and her bottom pressed directly to his hard cock. Charlie made a soft coo of surprise and pulled away. Brian sighed in relief, about to move away, when she pressed her luscious ass harder against him. He grunted. He couldn't help it. She felt so good against him.

"Brian?" She turned her face toward his, her light green eyes meeting his.

He cleared his throat. "Yeah?"

"Would you kiss me?"

Though his military training told him to step away, Brian couldn't. As he looked down at Charlie, he understood her request had nothing to do with the chaos around them. She didn't want a kiss to reaffirm her life or to celebrate escape. She wanted a kiss

because she wanted him. She trusted him. He had the feeling the trust part was more attractive to her than his body, or his accent.

He groaned softly, knowing it was insane, knowing at some point he was going to have to lie to her, yet knowing he couldn't stop himself from tasting her lips if General Rubenesso appeared and ordered it. He brought his hand up to cup her chin. She sighed softly, her eyelids fluttering closed.

Their lips touched, tentative, testing, gently tasting each other. Passion, a dull ebb and flow of energy between them for most of their time together, gained momentum and power. But neither rushed forward into the force. Charlie parted her lips to sip at his, her teeth softly nipping his lower lip before she pressed her mouth to his once more. Brian slid his hand from her jaw, over her smooth cheek, and into her hair.

The silky red strands sifted over his skin, sending blood rushing to his cock. He tightened his grip and opened his mouth over hers, wanting to feel her tongue against his, to experience the intimate glide of their flesh. She moaned, a tiny hum of pleasure, as he dipped into her warm mouth. Charlie opened wider, winding her tongue around his, dragging her palms up his chest and around his neck.

They shifted, their mouths never losing contact, until Charlie sat atop the steel length of his cock. She circled her pelvis slowly, groaning when the motion spiked her pleasure. Brian moved his free hand to her breast, skimming the side and top with soft caresses. He wanted to cup her flesh, mold it, weigh it, but her movements distracted him. His balls tightened at the uninhibited way she rode him.

She pulled her mouth from his and rose to her knees. Looking down, she dropped a hand, drawing his fingers to her taut nipple. "Touch me." Her peridot eyes shimmered in the dim light, desire potent and alive in their depths.

He should have stopped then. He should have ignored the flush of heat from her skin. He should have dismissed the insistent throb between his legs. Instead, he closed his fingers around the tight nub and thrust against her when she cried out.

Jaw clenched, he watched her find pleasure in his arms. Every bit of clothing in place, he felt the heat of her sex, the damp essence of her need against his cock as though they were naked. He'd never been so turned on in his life. He'd never felt so close to another being.

He moved his other hand to her unattended breast and took the other nipple. Slowly, he twisted, plucked, and rubbed both sensitive bits with alternating rhythms. Charlie moved her hands to his chest, fisting them in his shirt, and ground her body onto his. He felt the throb of her sex, saw the goose bumps course over her skin, sensed any moment she would find satisfaction.

Her breathing hiccupped and her thighs tightened around his. Brian released her nipples, moving one hand to her hip, holding her still while he rotated his hips hard beneath her. The other hand he wrapped around her nape, drawing her face back to his. His lips sealed over hers as her orgasm exploded. He swallowed her cries and fought not to come as well.

Charlie collapsed against him, shivering in the cool air. Brian closed his eyes and breathed deeply, forcing his body back from the precipice. He wrapped his arms around her, smiling at her contented sigh. In short order, her breathing fell into even patterns.

His legs tingled from lack of circulation, but Brian didn't move. Instead, he cradled her close and kept watch. Wondering how he was going to get out of this op with his heart intact.

Chapter 7

Brian listened to the night with his ears and his magic. Nothing of substance moved within several kilometers. Charlie shifted on his lap, slipping to the side, and he followed her, settling at her side. She murmured in her sleep but didn't wake. He watched her for a few moments, his chest puffing a little at how deeply she rested. Smiling softly, he conjured a blanket from his magic and settled it over her body.

Making sure he had alarms set, Brian set off into the surrounding foliage. He had a list of herbs necessary for the spell he was going to work. Calling someone magically, especially long distance, took a lot of power and uninterrupted focus.

His gift, his connection to earth, simplified his search. Brian could sense the plants he needed, and set about collecting them as efficiently as possible. He couldn't leave Charlie alone long and he had preliminary spellwork to do before she woke.

He returned to camp with what he needed. A little bit of scorpion bush, the Venezuelan forget-me-not, and of course yuca root. He loved tapioca and the root would serve well as his essence in the spell. Brian had picked up miscellaneous other plants, though none of them were important for what they were, but for what they would represent: air, earth, and fire.

Brian dropped his bag outside the cave. He took a quick look in on Charlie. She slept soundly, a soft snore stirring the quiet. He grinned, watching her for a few seconds more before turning back to his work. After preparing the plants, he made a small fire and set a cup of water to boil over it. A containment spell kept the smoke from dispersing on the slight wind and possibly giving them away. Even though he didn't sense them, Brian had no doubt the jaguars were still in pursuit.

When the water boiled, he tossed in the plants and let it steep. This spell didn't require words so much as intent. When the "tea" was ready, he smothered the flames,

disintegrated the smoke and the protective shield. Straining the debris from the cup took a couple of minutes, but sooner than he'd thought, Brian was ready. With one last look toward Charlie, he centered himself and began to conjure.

He went into himself, to the place where magic and spirit united. He drank the liquid and focused on the one person he knew would be on the Guardian sub. The potion seeped deep into his body, coalescing around the bright light of his power. He only had one chance to send this spell, one chance to make contact.

This was the only spell he could think of that wouldn't expose Charlie to his gifts. Unless she was sensitive to magic, which would have been in her profile, she wouldn't know he'd done anything. However, as soon as he finished, he'd have to wake her and break camp. It was idiocy to hope the shifters wouldn't notice a supernatural bang like he was about to create.

Focus. Think about Lucia. A few things reminded him of the Selkie woman. Fog on the sea, Irish folk music in a pub on Saturday nights, the mystery that was Mother Earth in all her glory, they all made him think of her. A couple of lines from a Pogues song flitted through his mind. *That's it. Lucia.*

Brian laced his spell with information. The coordinates she'd need to evac them. The shapeshifters hot behind them and how he'd lost the radio. The magic couldn't carry words. Instead, he infused it with sensations. Lucia would understand.

He built more and more power inside, wrapping it, blending it with his intentions until it became a bright white ball of enchantment. When the magic grew beyond the boundaries of his spirit and body, Brian let it go. It exploded from his core, blasting into the atmosphere. To any with mage-sight, it was a brilliant blue flare in the air. He slumped to the ground, exhausted, and watched his only hopes of rescue ascend over the canopy, hurtling toward its target.

"What the hell was that?"

Startled, Brian jerked upright, twisting to look at Charlie. "What?"

She sat in the cave mouth, her hand caressing his magical blanket as if she knew it was there. "That blue ball of light, what was it?"

Brian had no idea what to say. She shouldn't have seen it. She didn't have any gifts or power. Besides, if she were adept in any way it should have been in her profile or he should have felt it. "Are you awake?" If she weren't completely alert, that could explain it. The subconscious human mind had the ability to see many things an alert mind refused to acknowledge.

"Yes. Are you going to answer me?" She sighed irritably.

"No. Get moving."

"Are we going back onto the boat?"

He wasn't sure, but he thought he detected a tiny whine in her tone. "For a short way. Then we have to go on foot." Speaking of feet reminded him Charlie's footwear left much to be desired.

Brian put himself between Charlie's line of sight and his bag, pulling a glass tube from inside. He uncorked the top and a pair of boots appeared out of thin air. They were his spare set, reduced to magic in a vial, but they'd do. He chuckled them at her.

"Where did you get these? The bag of magic tricks?" Sarcastic though she was, a hint of laughter lightened her words.

"Yep. C'mon, let's move out." Brian moved down the path to the river.

He heard her sigh something, but she followed quickly. Testing his sensor nets, he detected the shifters. He didn't want to alarm Charlie, but the bastards moved fast. So, Brian grabbed her upper arm and jerked her into the boat, pushing them out into the water. He started the motor and jumped in.

They'd barely gotten forty feet when the scream of a pissed off cat tore through the air. Knowing jaguars were excellent swimmers, Brian hit the gas, so to speak, putting significant distance between the boat and the cave. He looked at Charlie, frowning when she glared at him. "Now what?"

"You need to stop grabbing me."

He snorted and pulled back on the throttle. Flipping the satchel open, he pulled out his map. Brian immersed himself in coordinates, trying to ignore Charlie for a few minutes.

"Brian?"

"Hmm?"

"You need to tell me what's going on. Even I know that normal jaguars would rather eat a capybara than a human. So why would this cat still be after us?"

"It's not the same cat, Charlie." He didn't look up at her when he answered.

"Bullshit." She jerked the map from his hands. "Tell me what's going on. Right now."

* * *

Lucia Malholland hadn't slept well in two days. Brian O'Connor had failed to check in and her gut told her he and the President's daughter were in trouble. She flung the blanket off and sat up in her bunk. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Lucia stood up and was heading to the lavatory when the hair on her body stood on end. Magic was coming.

She turned in time to see the spell blast into her room. She shielded her eyes from the light, too groggy to offer a counter attack. The orb flashed once, twice, and then hovered in front of her. Recognizing it for what it was, a calling, Lucia lifted her hand to the orb and sent her own power into it.

Images, impressions from the sender, spilled out of the orb and into Lucia's inner sight. A flash of relief surged through her when she recognized the sender. Brian and Charlene were safe, but shifters hunted them. An altercation destroyed the radio. Finally, a set of coordinates burned into her mind.

Lucia threw her clothes on then rushed for the con. She had to tell the captain the new rendezvous point. They needed to move this submarine double time to meet Brian and Charlie.

Chapter 8

They'd been walking in silence the entire day. Charlie refused to speak to him after he told her to forget about the damn cats. She'd been furious at his refusal to answer her question, but when he'd asked if she'd like him to lie, she'd clammed up and given him the cold shoulder.

"What's the worst thing you've seen in combat?"

Her question, after so much silence, startled Brian. He tripped over a root, cursing softly. "You don't want to know, Charlie. Imagine the worst thing you've experienced and magnify it a hundred-fold. You still won't be close."

She was silent for a few minutes. "I watched my mother die."

He knew Amelia Thompson had suffered from cancer. "I'm sorry, Charlie. Cancer is a horrible thing."

"Yes, it is. That's not what I meant, though. I was there with her when she died. I watched the light that made her alive slip away." Her voice sounded small, tired.

Brian stopped and turned around. Watching someone close pass on, especially for children, could do all kinds of harm. It also changed the person's perceptive abilities. Though they often couldn't use or recognize it, these few humans gained the ability to sense magic. It would explain how she'd seen his spell.

"Charlie, I didn't know. I take back what I said. Being with your mother when she died must have been... There aren't words to say. Where was your da?"

She smiled a little at his word for father. "He was in a meeting with some chairperson or something. It was back when he was a governor." She laughed humorlessly. "You know, I have no idea where he was. I just remember being very alone." She shook her head.

"I'm sure he didn't mean to leave you. He probably didn't have a choice, Charlie."

She turned away from him. "No, he never means to do anything to hurt me. He just does."

"That's not true." Brian had no idea if it was or not, but he hated seeing her hurting.

"That's the problem. The truth. I listen to it be bent and twisted, I see it on the news and in the papers. Lies, everywhere. It's why I don't date, why I don't trust anyone. Too many promises broken, too many white lies told to 'protect' me."

"Charlie..."

"No, don't. If you give me nothing else, Brian O'Connor, you had better give me the truth. I'd rather you say nothing than lie to me." She turned back to face him, her eyes shining, her jaw set in a strong, brook-no-arguments line.

"I can't always tell you the truth, Charlie." He hated to say those words, but he had to.

"I know. You're messing with my head, O'Connor." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "You could have lied to me just now, promised to be honest always, but you didn't. As long as you don't lie to me, we'll get through this fine."

"All right." Brian's gut churned. He really didn't want to have this kind of conversation with her. It let him see too much of her. His respect for her grew with each passing moment, as did his lust. The more time he spent with Charlie, the more he liked her. She was wounded, but she didn't lash out at everyone because of it. She was intelligent, determined, and sexy as hell. *Ah ah, don't go there, boy-o.*

Thoughts of the previous night were the last thing he had any intention of entertaining. To keep his mind where it ought to be, Brian asked Charlie another question, this one sure to get her irritation climbing. "So, Charlie, what'd you do to that fellow who sold those partly naked pics of you to *Prattle Report*?"

She growled. She actually growled and Brian roared with laughter. "Shut up, ass. I swear that was one time I was tempted to get my father to make a person disappear."

"Well, you do have something of a reputation for craziness." Brian's smile died when he heard the odd gasp she made. "What's the matter?" He circled around to face her.

"Do you believe that crap?"

The pained look on her face tore at him. He was tempted to fib, but he didn't want to lie to her more than he already had to. "Honestly, I wondered about it, yeah. But it's not my place to judge anyone, so even if you were a hellion, I wouldn't care.

"Cause so far, all I've seen is a strong, determined, and surprisingly cooperative woman. Someone who could sit, complain, and whine because I'm not catering to her, but who isn't because she just doesn't have it in her. I like you, Charlie, regardless of what anyone else may think."

She eyed him curiously, before nodding slightly. "I believe you. I want you to promise me something, magic man."

"Magic what?" Brian plastered a smart-ass grin to his face, his heart pounding like a racehorse on a straightaway.

"Hey, you have a magic bag full of magic tricks. And I trust you. You must be magic. Or really 'special'." Mischief sparkled in the depths of her eyes, her emphasis on special undeniably insulting.

"Funny." He cocked a brow and she giggled. The sound traveled through the air and lit at the base of his cock, filling it with blood. He turned to hide his arousal, gritting his teeth. Walking several miles with a hard on was not his idea of a good time.

"Seriously, promise me something."

"Charlie, move your ass. We have another twelve miles before we can stop." Brian had no idea what she wanted, but giving his word wasn't a whimsy. Swearing to something, when one was a mage, meant forswearing had nasty consequences.

Thankfully, she clammed up and didn't say anything more. Brian adjusted himself and trudged forward, aware of the growing tension between them. Sooner, he figured, rather than later she'd ask him again. He cursed himself silently. If they stayed together for much longer, Brian was sure he wouldn't care about consequences.

* * *

Charlie sighed as she watched the most perfect ass in existence bunch and flex. She'd been hiking through the unknown staring at Brian's glutes for what seemed like forever and her libido was going crazy. Her brain replayed the dry hump from the night before in a loop, relentlessly reminding her that her orgasm with Brian had been just about her best ever.

A tiny whimper escaped her lips when her hard nipples chafed inside the flirty lace bra. She was sticky, tired, and sore but all her body cared about was getting the real deal. Charlie couldn't figure out if she was suffering from a weird case of Stockholm Syndrome or what, but she felt like she was getting a little too attached to her rescuer.

Not that falling in love with Brian was a bad thing. Who was she kidding? Falling in love with him would be nuts. Not only did they barely know each other, she sensed her being the President's daughter could seriously complicate his life. Trying to distract herself from ridiculous thoughts, she asked Brian to tell her more about growing up in Ireland.

His lyrical voice washed over her. She loved his voice. Not the accent as much as the subtle roughness it had. Every time he spoke, Charlie felt like he touched her with his hand. *His voice might stop you from thinking about love, but not about sex*, her conscience piped up, but she squashed it.

Trying to divert herself, Charlie picked up the conversation where they'd left off. "So, you have four sisters and a brother, and a million aunts, uncles, and cousins? Man, family get-togethers with the O'Connors must be something." She laughed as she said it, her imagination providing all sorts of amusing situations.

"You could say that. There's never a lack of anything with my family. They laugh, talk, fight, and love with every bit of life they have."

"It sounds chaotic, but awesome too. I'm an only child. Neither of my parents' parents were alive when I was born. I don't have any cousins or aunts and uncles."

"You must have been lonely."

"Not really. At least not until my mother died. You know, she made me promise to be the best daughter I could. She wanted me to take care of him, support him. I swore to her I would. And I did."

"Do I hear a but?" Brian cut a vine from their path. He held his hand out to Charlie, helping her over the debris.

"But he promised he wouldn't run for the presidency a second time. I don't know why I thought he'd give up politics, but I did. When he announced his intent to win a second term, I tossed in the towel."

"Ah, so that would be why the perfect princess became the wild one?" He released her hand and started forward again.

Charlie sighed, but followed. "Yeah, I guess. You know, my mother was thirty-four when she died. She worked out every day, ate healthy, never smoked, rarely drank. She was beautiful, vibrant before the cancer. And it stripped her of everything. I'm tired of living for my father. It's time to live for me."

"There's nothing wrong with that, Charlie." Brian stopped, waiting for her to catch up.

She moved behind him. God, she wanted this man who made no judgments. Knowing it was completely out of line, maybe even wrong, Charlie lifted her hands to the broad back before her. She placed her palms on his waist, slipping into the dip at the base of his spine. His muscles bunched beneath her hands, tension mounting. Shoring up her courage, Charlie spread her fingers and moved her hands upward, learning the feel of his body, despite the clothing.

"Don't." He spoke low, warning her.

"I want to. I want you." Her voice quivered, but Charlie didn't stop. She closed her eyes as her palms smoothed over his hard shoulders, her stomach flip-flopping with desire.

"We can't afford to stop now, Charlie. And I won't let you confuse gratitude with sex." His brogue thickened, his words growing harsher, deeper.

Charlie shuddered, lust pounding through her blood. His words hurt, but then she knew he'd meant them to. It pissed her off, but not enough to back away. He was trying to protect her. She appreciated it. But she knew if she left this jungle without knowing how he felt buried deep inside, she'd never know.

She closed the last bit of space between them, slipping her hands down his arms and around his stomach. She took the bottom edge of his shirt in her fingers, moving it out of the way. The first brush of her skin against his made his abs ripple. He groaned.

"This isn't about gratitude, Brian. I know it's dangerous, but I don't care. I want to know you, more than my next breath." Charlie pressed her face to his back and feathered her fingers over every bump and indentation of his magnificent belly and chest. When she scraped her nails over his nipples, she felt him snap.

Chapter 9

"For fuck's sake." Brian shuddered when her short nails raked over his sensitive nipples. He pulled her arms from beneath his shirt and spun around, grabbing her shoulders. "This is going to be fast and rough. You'd better be sure."

Her pupils expanded, a blush suffusing her neck and cheeks. "I'm sure."

This time, when their mouths met it was an explosion of emotion. Desire, anxiety, desperate tension mixed in their blood. They came together with hungry groans and soft growls, teeth nipping, biting, tongues thrusting deep only to retreat before attacking again.

Charlie dug her hands into his shoulders, hiking her leg up along his thigh, trying to climb up him, inside him if she could. She'd never experienced passion so volatile, so intense, and she relished every savage moment. Brian slid his hands down her back and over her ass. She moaned into his mouth as his fingers dug into her flesh, lifting her off the ground. Charlie wrapped her legs around his waist, kissing him hard. When her body slammed into a tree, she cried out at the shock and small pain.

"You're making me crazy." Brian pulled away from her mouth, pressing kisses over her jaw and down her neck.

He tried to tug the T-shirt he'd given her earlier out of the way, wanting to taste more of her skin, but it didn't have much give. In frustration, he fisted the neck of it in his hands and tore it apart.

"Wow." Charlie's pulse pounded at the base of her throat and her voice grew huskier.

"It was in the way." Beneath the ragged T-shirt, she wore a short, one-piece baby doll dress with an elastic neckline. "That's more like it."

The dress proved no deterrent to his lusty journey. He pulled the top down, exposing her lacy bra and luscious breasts. Brian groaned at the bounty, putting his hand back on her ass, lifting her higher. He took one nipple into his mouth, flicking the tight nub with his tongue. The lace softened in the moisture of his suckling and Charlie keened her pleasure.

He moved to the other, nipping at the distended tip, his cock a pounding, heavy weight between his legs. She dropped her arms to his shoulders, her hands grasping the muscles in his back. She dug her nails in, and even through the cloth of his shirt, the small sting made his blood boil with need.

Brian released her nipple, leaning back to look at her face. She met his gaze, and sweat dotted her brow. He shifted her, pressing his hard cock to the vee of her thighs, tugging her dress out of the way. When her dress was free of the press of their bodies, he slipped a hand to his fly and released his aching cock.

Taking her ass in hand once more, he shot a startled look at her face when all he felt was smooth, warm skin.

"It's a thong." The words exploded from her and she moaned.

Brian grunted, his cock harder than steel. He rubbed her flesh, kneading it, stroking it until he found the narrow strip of cloth. He pulled it hard to the side, trying not to tear her panties off though he wanted to. "Tighten your legs around me, Charlie."

She rocked her pelvis against him, whimpering as desire overwhelmed her. "Oh, God."

Holding her underwear out of the way, Brian lifted her up and slid his cock against her. She was wet, slippery with need, and hot. The head of his cock bumped against the mouth of her pussy and he pushed forward slowly, letting just the tip slip in. Charlie let her head loll, her teeth tugging at her lower lip.

The tips of her breasts were hard, pressed against their lacy confines. Her skin was flushed, her eyes glazed. Brian squeezed her ass and looked deep into her eyes. Then he filled her with his thick cock, fighting not to come when she tightened around him and held her breath.

Charlie wanted to scream her pleasure to the heavens. The feel of Brian's cock sliding into her body was beyond description. Her pussy contracted around him, the slick liquid of her arousal easing his entry. She ground herself against him, wanting him deeper, harder. Tightening her thighs, she pressed into him until the soft hair at his groin teased her aching clit.

She opened her eyes to watch his face. The intensity she saw ratcheted her need to near painful levels. She drew her hands from his back to his chest, finding the hard nubs of his nipples. She circled them, scraped over them, and then took them between her thumbs and forefingers. She pinched the buds and he slammed his cock deep.

Charlie gasped at the sensation. She pinched his nipples again, and he growled before ramming home. The bark of the tree bit into her back, but she didn't care. Being with him felt so good, nothing else mattered.

"More, Brian. Hurry." She twisted his nipples and Brian exploded.

She couldn't stop the gasps spilling from her lips as he took her, hard, deep, and rough. She pulled his head to her breasts, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, and held on. Her pussy grew wetter and wetter, each thrust of his pelvis against her clit bringing her one step closer to detonation.

When he changed the angle of his thrusts, rubbing against the sensitive cluster of nerves at the top of her sex, the shudders started. Brian let go of her ass to grasp her thighs, slowing his thrusts, grinding against her. Every muscle in her body tightened around him. She was close.

His hot breath teased her ear. "Come, Charlie. Come right now." He pushed hard against her clit, rotating his hips, and she obeyed.

His mouth covered hers, swallowing her scream of release. Her pussy clutched his cock, rippling around him, and she cried out again. When the contractions softened and her body felt like it was boneless, Brian withdrew and plunged deep again.

Charlie broke the kiss to watch his face, her body revving up to come again. He didn't look away as his rhythm became frantic.

She swept the tip of her tongue over his lips. "Yes, Brian."

The whites of his eyes flashed a moment before he crammed himself as far into her soft, wet body as he could. With the first splash of his hot come deep inside, another orgasm arced through Charlie. Slower, sweeter, but no less intense than the first.

Brian held them up against the tree while they recovered. Charlie pressed soft kisses to his face, unwinding her legs slowly. He set her on her feet and adjusted her dress and she let him. Then his face closed and he turned away. "Let's go."

Charlie tried not to let his comment hurt. She'd expected it. The fact that it bothered her at all meant worrying about falling in love was ridiculous. She was already three-quarters of the way there.

Chapter 10

Brian picked his bag up off the ground and walked away. Legs still shaking from an unbelievable orgasm, Charlie steadied herself and followed Brian. The sun was nearly gone from the sky, but she noticed the trees were thinning. It seemed they were coming to civilization, of a sort.

He set a grueling pace, his strides nearly a run by the time they broke from the forest. Charlie hoped he wasn't running from her, but she feared that was at least part of his rush. He disappeared from sight and she panicked for a moment. Then she saw his back through a break in the trees and she sighed with relief.

Charlie emerged from the jungle, stopping beside Brian, breathing hard while she took in the landscape. It was a ranch, if all the cattle were anything to go by. He looked at her, lifting a finger to his mouth. She nodded and tried to soften the sound of her laboring lungs.

He trotted off in the direction of the closest building. It looked like a small barn, an old one at that, but Charlie didn't care. Any shelter would do. She was bone-tired, mostly in a good way, but hunger twisted her guts and thirst made her mouth sticky.

Brian motioned her to hurry up. She jogged to meet him. He wrapped his hand around hers and pulled her to his side. Her body reacted immediately, a hot flush of need scorching her skin. He put his mouth to her ear. His warm, moist breath sent electricity jumping between her cells. If he was trying to drive her nuts, it was working.

"We're holing up in here. Hopefully, the cows will let us know if any predators get close."

Soft lips brushed the lobe of Charlie's ear and she fought not to squirm with need. "Okay."

The aged door squeaked when he opened it, but the cows didn't budge. Inside, a few bales of hay lined part of one wall, but otherwise the small building was empty. Brian tossed his bag down as he strode toward the hay. Pulling a bale from the others, he spread the forage on the ground.

"I'm going out to check the area." He motioned toward the makeshift bed. "It'll be scratchy, but it's better than the ground. Get some rest. I won't be long."

Charlie resisted the urge to kiss him, to soothe him. The sex had been more than that for her, and she feared he knew it. He seemed agitated and restless, and she wanted to ease the worried frown from his face. She didn't expect anything more from him. But Charlie held her tongue.

Instead, she gave him a small wave and knelt down on the hay. He turned to go, then turned back and stripped off his shirt. Her heart kicked and her clit throbbed, but she tamped down her reaction.

"Use this to cushion your head." He tossed the shirt to her and she smiled.

"Thanks."

With a nod, he headed back outside.

* * *

"For fuck's sake." Brian raked a hand through his hair. His emotions warred, shifting from disgust at himself to masculine pride and back again. He couldn't stop thinking about being with Charlie.

He'd fucked many women in his time. He enjoyed women and they enjoyed him. He refused to romanticize what had happened, yet he couldn't shake the feel of her body clenching his, or the unbelievable power of his release. He was sure sex had been that good, or at least close, with someone else. He just couldn't remember it.

"Like you'd forget shagging that good, O'Connor."

"I'm an old man, it's possible." He was arguing aloud with himself.

"Sure." His conscience wasn't buying it.

Grinding his teeth, Brian ignored the voice of truth and set about checking the perimeter. He didn't sense anything nearby, definitely a plus. He spun around to face

the few head of cattle nearby. As an elemental mage, he had a strong tie to the planet and all of her diverse inhabitants. And, in his case, that translated into a little Dr. Dolittle-ness.

Brian made eye contact with the six cows nearest him, calling them to his side. They meandered, as cattle are wont to do, but eventually they stood in a semi-circle in front of him, their bovine rears toward the forest.

"Okay. Here's the deal. I need you to warn me of danger. Be on the lookout for any weird things in the jungle. Give me a moo, something, before you run off." The cows chewed thoughtfully, before mooing their agreement. "Thanks. If I get out of here, I'll have some alfalfa and oats dropped in."

"Are you talking to the cows?" Charlie's incredulous giggle scared him out of his skin.

"Don't do that! You scared the bejesus out of me!" He whirled on her, but she wasn't properly fearful. No, she was grinning broadly.

"Maybe I was right about you being 'special.' Do you have a lot of 'special' friends, or do you just have a bond with cows?" She was laughing at him with every fiber of her being and Brian felt a flush creep up his neck. He hadn't blushed in a very long time, which added to his irritation.

"I wasn't talking to the cows." He gritted his teeth and glared.

"Whatever you say, magic man. I heard you mooing at them." Charlie took in his black look and fought not to laugh uproariously. "You deserve my ribbing, after you laughed at me for the mud."

Brian tried to stay irked, but the reminder of her covered in mud made his lips curve. He started back toward the shelter and she fell into step beside him.

"Why are you out here? Didn't I tell you to stay put?"

"No, you didn't. Besides, you'd been gone for a long time. I was worried." She reached for his hand, tentatively. Brian swallowed a sigh. Holding hands was not part of the mission, but he laced her fingers with his anyway.

"Don't worry about me, Charlie." She grunted and Brian tightened his hand on hers. "I mean it. I don't care what's happening. Don't put yourself in a position to be recaptured."

"I won't just leave you behind." There was no hesitancy in her answer.

They reached the barn and he dropped her hand, taking her by the shoulder and whipping her around to face him. "This isn't a debate. You will leave me and you will haul your precious ass to the nearest house, village, town, whatever, and call for help. If you can't find a way to contact help where you stop, keep going until you do. Do you understand?" He gave her a little shake for emphasis.

"I understand. I still won't do it." Her jaw set in a stubborn line and her eyes flashed resolve.

"Damn it! I should never have fucked you." He released her and spun around, giving her his back.

"Fucking?" She spat the word at him, her hurt feelings evident. "Our fucking has nothing to do with it. I wouldn't have left you behind yesterday morning, either."

Charlie bit her lip to hold back the tears clogging her throat, welling in her eyes. She stalked to the door, jerked it open, and almost slammed it shut, stopping at the last minute to close the door quietly after she stomped inside. She flopped onto the straw, the little pain of hitting barely cushioned dirt spiking her anger and lessening her sadness.

His shirt stared at her from the makeshift bed. She balled it up and threw it at the door, rolling to her side, using her arm to cushion her head as she lay down. Brian was being an ass, even if she understood why. He'd come to rescue her, so if something happened to him, she needed to leave him and run away. If she didn't get back home, it would be as if he'd sacrificed himself for nothing.

Charlie understood that, but she knew herself too well. She would not be able to leave him if he were hurt. The guilt of doing so, regardless of their recent intimacy, would be a weight she couldn't bear.

The door creaked softly, but she didn't roll over. She heard Brian mumbling under his breath, listened as he shucked his boots and picked up the shirt. The straw swooshed and scraped as he moved over it. She tensed when the warmth of his body settled behind her.

"I'm sorry, Charlie. You know I don't want to hurt you." He held himself away from her, and she fought not to shift backward.

"Well, you did. I even understand why, I think. But it doesn't change the fact that I won't leave you hurting and run away. I can't."

"For fuck's sake, Charlie." His deep voice didn't sound aggravated so much as resigned.

"Is that your favorite sentence, Brian?" She hoped a little levity would ease the tension between them. And he did use the term frequently.

He pressed himself against her, wrapping his arm over her waist. "Forgive me for being an asshole?"

Charlie didn't even bother staying upset. "You know I do."

"Good." His hand slid over her stomach to cup her breast, strong fingers plucking at her nipple until it stood hard and proud beneath her top.

Chapter 11

"You better be sure." Charlie paraphrased his earlier warning.

Brian kissed her slowly before answering. "I am."

"Good. I want to see you this time, Brian. I want to touch you."

He smiled, sat up, and began shucking his clothing. Charlie followed suit. Before the last strip of fabric landed on the ground, hands ran over bare skin. Charlie marveled at his musculature. Brian was sleek, but every tendon, every fiber of muscle was exquisitely detailed. Her fingertips glided over his shoulders, down the hard flesh of his arms. She danced them across his perfect six-pack, smiling when he jerked in ticklish response. Other than that small jerk, he was still and let her explore.

Charlie shoved at his shoulders gently, and he settled himself on the ground. His cock rose hard and proud above his groin. She hesitated a moment, thrilled when the thick organ twitched in anticipation of her touch. Softly, she pressed one finger to the tip. A bead of pearly fluid appeared and Charlie's mouth watered. She wanted to taste it.

Leaning forward, Charlie slipped her tongue from her mouth and swiped the tangy drop of pre-come onto the tip. He groaned, his cock flexing again. He tasted salty, musky, masculine. She hummed her pleasure at his flavor, and then reached out, wrapping her fingers around the wide shaft. She opened her mouth and took him inside.

His hips rose from the ground when she swirled her tongue around the flared head of his cock. She opened wider and took him deeper into her mouth, sucking lightly, teasing him. Charlie moved her hand up and down along the shaft, following the motions of her mouth. Brian groaned and laced his fingers through her short locks.

She hummed her approval against his cock, sexual power heating her blood and swelling her clit.

“Enough, Charlie.” Brian tugged her hair, pulling her off him. She released him grudgingly, carefully scraping her teeth along his length. He hissed, rearing up, pulling her face to his, and taking her mouth in a harsh, wild kiss.

Charlie submitted to him, desire turning her body soft, languid. He pressed her to her back and she went willingly, her tongue tangling with his when he deepened the kiss. One calloused hand caressed her bare breast, the rough pads of Brian’s fingers over her hard nipples sending jolts of pleasure to her sex. When he pinched the aroused flesh, she mewled in response.

Brian broke away from her mouth to flick his tongue against her ear. She shivered, hot need coursing through her body. He nipped and suckled his way to her breasts, settling beside her, taking his time. When his warm, wet mouth closed over the aching tip, she grabbed his head, holding him to her.

When he’d touched her through clothing, it had been fantastic. But the feel of his tongue against her skin with no barriers made Charlie tighten her thighs. Her clit thrummed, pulsing between her legs. The liquid proof of her hunger seeped from her pussy, coating her labia and thighs. She moaned, shifting beneath his erotic assault, wanting more.

Brian chuckled darkly, moving one hand down over her belly. He slipped his fingers between her legs, rubbing the long digits over her erect clit, teasing the mouth of her sex with shallow penetrations. Charlie whimpered, lifting her hips, seeking the pleasure of his body filling hers. He bit her nipple, not hard, more like a reprimand for her motions, before sliding his body between her legs and beginning the sweet torture of her other breast.

As he did to the first, Brian swirled his tongue around the tip, not touching it. Her anticipation skyrocketed until she begged him to suck on it, bite it, anything to ease the ache. Instead, he flicked his tongue over it, first slowly, then steadily faster until her hips gyrated with every new brush of his hot, damp skin over hers. Finally, he took the

rigid crest between his teeth, pressing until a slight pain washed over her. Charlie keened, the mix of pleasure and a sweet, aching sting nearly pushing her over the edge.

She writhed, her need stripping her of any inhibitions. Charlie grabbed at his back, dragging her nails across his skin hard. He growled but she didn't ease up. Brian released her nipple, slipping down her body, until his hot breath teased the downy curls shielding her pussy.

Shouldering her thighs wider, Brian ran his fingertips over the plump lips of her sex. Charlie sighed and spread her legs farther apart, wanting desperately to feel his mouth against her. He didn't make her wait long, taking the time to pull her labia open before sliding his tongue the entire length of her pussy. Her lungs froze and her muscles tightened. Brian teased her clit with hard forays with his tongue, then caressed the sensitive flesh with his lips, before attacking again with quick, frenzied tonguing.

Charlie took a breast in each hand, rolling the nipples, intensifying every sensation until her body hung on the precipice of release. Her pussy fluttered, aching to be filled. Brian must have sensed hunger because he stopped tormenting her clit and started sucking on it hard. He thrust one, then two, fingers deep into her sex and Charlie exploded.

She tried to hold in her cries of pleasure, biting her lip to stifle the sounds. Brian sucked her clit voraciously and began curling his fingers against her G-spot. The contractions of her body multiplied ten-fold as her second orgasm crashed through her. He brought her to two more devastating finishes before pulling his fingers back and easing his body up and over hers.

"Are you all right?"

Charlie fought the urge to cry. She was much better than all right. "Hell, yes." She managed a weak smile, her body shivering in the wake of aftershocks.

"Ready for more?" Smile lines crinkled at the corners of his cerulean eyes.

"Definitely."

Charlie smoothed her hands up his arms and around his neck, hooking her ankles over his firm ass. The tip of his cock speared her and she lifted her hips to meet him.

The sex was slower this time, less frenzied, but not less passionate. Brian made certain she felt every glorious inch of his cock as it filled her before withdrawing with agonizing sluggishness. He thrust his hips, carefully timing each movement, precisely finding the small mass of nerves in her pussy. Each time he hit her pleasure center, Charlie moaned and tightened her body around him.

In increments, he increased the speed and strength of his penetration. He built the pleasure between them until neither could be silent. He grunted each time the head of his cock hit the mouth of her womb. She keened when he withdrew. Muscles burning, eyes locked, they pushed toward an orgasm sure to leave them slick and shaken.

Charlie felt the telltale flutters of her pussy. She was going to come and she wanted him with her. "I'm so close. Oh God!" She didn't look away when he slipped a hand between them and pinched her clit. Her mouth opened on a silent scream while her body rode his cock, milking it, flexing and releasing in rhythmic waves.

Brian slammed his lower body against hers, his cock pounding in and out, harder, faster. The muscles in his shoulders and chest bulged a moment before come exploded from his body, filling Charlie. He roared his pleasure, mouth wide, the sound choking him while his body instinctively slammed into hers over and over.

When the orgasm passed, Brian collapsed against Charlie and she relished his weight. They were sweaty, their bodies sticking together, but she didn't mind. She sighed contentedly when he rolled to his side, withdrawing from her body, and pulled her close.

"I don't think we should do this again." His voice was soft, but Charlie heard every word.

"I know. We would never work out." Though her heart disagreed vehemently, her head said she was right.

"I'm sorry, Charlie." He hugged her close. She sensed this conversation was as hard for him as it was for her.

"I'm not." Charlie kissed his chest and closed her eyes. She would never be sorry about Brian.

Chapter 12

"Moooo-ooo-o!" The startled cry of a cow jolted Brian and Charlie awake.

"What the hell is wrong with that cow?"

"Get up! Now, Charlie, we have to go!" Brian struggled into his pants, jumped up and shoved his feet into his boots, and grabbed his bag.

Charlie had her bra and dress on, was in the middle of hopping into her boots, when he grabbed her arm and jerked her from the barn. Outside, the cows mooed as if their lives depended on it. Several large steers faced the woods, while the cows bolted deeper into the pasture.

Brian closed his eyes and Charlie heard a loud buzzing in her head. His hand on her arm grew hot and panic surged. *What the hell was he doing?* She didn't get a chance to ask.

He turned to her, releasing her arm only to recapture her hand. He pulled her close, covering her mouth in a hard, punishing kiss. Stunned, Charlie responded instinctively, opening to him, sliding her tongue against his. When he released her, she stumbled. Brian put a hand in his bag, withdrawing a compass and two vials.

"Take these. Head northeast. You'll reach the delta in about ten miles. If you get into any trouble, drink this." He shoved the tube with blue liquid into her palm. "When you get to the coast, uncork the other vial. It's a flare. The rescue team will find you."

"Brian, no!"

"God damn it, Charlie! Just do it. I can't stay and fight if I don't know you're safe." His beautiful cerulean eyes beseeched her, but Charlie shook her head.

She threw the vial at the barn. A tiny explosion sent colored sparks into the air when the glass shattered against wood. And then the barn disappeared.

"For fuck's sake!" Brian roared at her. "What have you done?"

Charlie blinked, disbelieving what her eyes told her. She should have been terrified, she supposed, but seeing something impossible couldn't overwhelm the horrible feeling that Brian would die. She swallowed hard and met his furious gaze.

"I'm forcing you to come with me. We have a better chance together than apart." The steers screamed in terror and bolted. Whatever sent them fleeing was closing in.

Brian wanted to strangle her, but the shifters were less than a thousand yards from their position. Shoving the compass and remaining vial back into the bag, he grabbed her wrist and bolted for the larger barn further afield. He prayed it housed a horse or two, but they wouldn't have much time to check. At this point, he'd take a bicycle because he and Charlie couldn't outrun the shapeshifters.

As if they needed more motivation, a loud, predatory scream sounded from behind them. Charlie lurched in his grip. He tried to warn her not to look back, but it was too late.

"Holy shit! What the fuck are those things?" Terror shot her voice into high-pitched tones.

He didn't answer her. Instead, he tightened his grip and ran faster, willing her to keep up. They hit the side of the other barn running hell-bent for leather. Brian sent a surge of power into the building, wanting to cry with relief when he sensed three horses.

He shot a glance behind him. One shifter slammed into an invisible wall, and the other rounded to check on his fallen comrade. Charlie's crazy antic had bought them some time. The unseen building swarming with human scent distracted the shifters. Brian, Charlie trailing behind him, tore around the horse stable, searching for an opening. He found it, threw her inside, and looked around.

He didn't see saddles, only a hackney halter, leader ropes, and old horse-powered farming equipment. Grabbing the halter from its peg, Brian moved further into the barn. The horses were all draft sized, massive beasts. One whickered at his approach. His magic told him it was the youngest. The gelding would have to do.

"Stay here and don't make a sound."

Brian skipped the pleasantries with the animal, instead opening the gate to the horse's stall and throwing the halter on him as fast as possible. He fisted his hand in its mane and bounded onto the young male's back. The gelding danced, but Brian soothed it. He rushed back to Charlie, offering her a hand.

"Get on." Her eyes were wide, but she didn't hesitate. When he had a solid grip on her forearm, fingers wrapped around her elbow, he pulled her off the ground and behind him. "Hold on." A gust of wind blew the barn doors wide open and Brian kicked their mount into a gallop.

They burst from the barn and into the corral. A loud growl from nearby made the horse pitch its head and whinny in terror. It started to rear up, but Brian locked minds with the beast, overriding its panic. Instead, he sent the horse forward toward the fence.

They cleared it as if the draft horse had wings. Dirt and grass flew up under its hooves when it landed, jostling its riders hard. Brian urged the horse faster, one hand buried in its mane, the other clenching the harness ropes. Charlie held on so tightly he had difficulty breathing. Her chin dug into his spine, her face buried against his back.

The horse's lungs bellowed as its hooves tore up the earth. Brian looked over his shoulder. The shifters had stopped about two hundred yards behind them. Brian knew they weren't giving up. They were changing from half man, half beast to full animal mode. It wouldn't give him and Charlie much advantage, but he'd take any delay.

Brian tightened his heels into the horse's sides, pointed him northeast and gave him free rein to run. Hundreds of acres of pastureland spread out before them. The horse jolted beneath them, its pace increasing. Brian looked back as they crested a small rise. He couldn't see the shifters clearly, but he'd doubled their distance.

Quickly looking around, Brian noticed a small stand of trees. With a nudge of his heel, he headed the horse toward it. The beast put its head down and plunged into the grove. Brian swore as branches and twigs whipped his head and upper body. He jerked the horse to a stop, spinning the animal so he could see the pasture.

"Why are we stopped?" Charlie shook with fear, as did the horse. They both thought he was crazy.

"Shut up. Don't move." Brian opened his magic to the earth, calling wind and rain. The sky rumbled with intent, black clouds filling the sky. Lightning ripped through the air, slamming into the ground. Charlie and the horse both squealed.

He spied one of the cats and let loose all the fury of the storm. Torrential rain beat the ground, lightning cracking, snapping. The cat stopped, the animal's natural instinct telling it to hide from a violent thunderstorm. Brian used its hesitation against it, sending a lance of lightning right at it. The shifter screamed briefly, before the force of electricity coursing through its body silenced it forever.

He searched the fields, but he couldn't spot the other. Unwilling to hope the big cat had run away, unable to stay in the trees, Brian nudged the horse back into the open. The beast's muscles quivered with fear, but Brian kept a strong hand on the reins. They proceeded slowly, rain pelting them, thunder rumbling. His eyes scanned for any motion, magic working as a seismometer. He felt the jolt a moment before he heard the growl.

Brian didn't think. He let go of the reins, twisting his body as he did it, shoving Charlie to the ground. She screamed, but he couldn't check on her. He threw himself to the side and felt fur across his face as the jaguar launched itself across the horse's withers.

He hit the ground hard, his shoulder wrenching at the impact. Rearing up, the horse struck out at the cat with both powerful forefeet. The shifter screamed as hooves slammed into its chest. The cat tumbled backward from the blows, away from horse and rider, giving Brian a chance to fight. Grateful to his equine companion, Brian calmed his panic with reassuring thoughts and shoved himself to his feet.

His right arm was useless, the shoulder dislocated. Regardless, he whirled to face the shifter. The feline had been stunned by the horse's attack, but was recovering quickly.

Brian called a clap of thunder. "You saw what happened to your friend."

The cat hissed. "I have my orders. Let the woman go, mage, and maybe I'll let you live."

"No way, shifter." Brian called his magic, growling low in his body as the power built inside.

The cat leapt at him, claws extended, mouth wide, a furious roar spilling from inside. Brian lurched to the left, gasped in agony when the cat's talons slashed his already wounded arm. He reached around for his bag, but it was gone.

"For fuck's sake." He had no idea where his satchel had gone, but without it, he didn't have much chance. He needed his potions.

Magic surged through his body. Lightning exploded from the sky, lancing itself deep into the earth next to the jaguar. The cat ran toward Brian, and another arrow of white-hot power hammered into the ground. The shifter barely avoided the shot, swerving at the last moment. Brian called a shield to protect his neck and held his ground.

The collision slammed him to the earth. The magical force field kept the shifter from tearing out his throat, but it wouldn't hold for long. With his good hand, Brian wrapped his fingers around the furious animal's neck and squeezed. His protection couldn't hold under the power of lycanthrope rage and claws tore into his legs. Hot breath washed over his face as Brian fought to hold the razor sharp teeth at bay. *Charlie*.

He fought to see her. He spotted her on her belly, her hand buried in his bag. She pulled vials free, looking at them before dropping them and rummaging for more. A metallic flash caught his eye.

"That one, Charlie!" Brian drew on his every ounce of energy. He watched her scabble to her feet and uncork the vial. If the shifter wasn't off him when she threw the potion, they'd both die.

The cat went rigid above him. It screamed an all too human sound. Fire scorched his arm, and Brian thrust his hips, throwing the animal to the side. He rolled away, crushing the flames on his own skin. He looked up and saw Charlie staring stupefied as flames engulfed the metamorph.

“Another ‘special’ friend?” Charlie dropped to his side. She had a cut on her leg, but otherwise she seemed intact.

“What?”

“You were talking to the cat in meows and shit. Did you really think it would understand you? Or is that some weird military survival tactic?” She pulled his bag up, settling it on his stomach.

“Yeah, something like that.” She seemed to be taking the whole thing rather in stride, which worried Brian. He tried to sit up, pain tearing through his belly, arms, and legs.

“That jaguar was on top of you, going crazy, but you only have a few nasty cuts. You should be disemboweled.” Charlie wasn’t really talking to him, so Brian remained quiet. He didn’t have the strength to lie anyway. Each breath was a struggle.

The cat had torn him up worse than she realized. He needed a healer. “Charlie, I’m hurt, bad. You have to get to the evac site. They’ll come and get me.”

“No way. Like I’m gonna let you lay here and bleed?” She tossed the flap of the bag back, opening it up so she could see inside. She pulled out a vial. “Bottom’s up.”

Brian tried to turn his head away. He had no idea what potion she was trying to force down his throat. The last thing he needed was to start glowing like a light bulb, which he would if she gave him the illumination spell. “Charlie, no, you don’t know what you’re messing with.”

“It’s the same color as the ones you gave me. Drink.” She thrust the open top between his teeth and emptied its contents into his mouth.

The same color as the healing potions meant it was probably the resurrection. Except he wasn’t recently dead, so Brian had no idea what it would do to him. But it was too late. The magic had infiltrated his blood, setting off a powerful chain reaction.

“So that’s what it looked like when I took it. Huh.” Charlie’s voice sounded far away.

Brian felt his body lift off the ground. Then he felt nothing as darkness closed around him.

Chapter 13

Brian opened his eyes and saw the ground and a reddish brown belly. He wiggled, still groggy, and nearly slipped from his perch. "Charlie! Stop the horse." The gelding halted and Brian righted himself. "Where are we?"

Charlie came around to the horse's flank. "I have no idea. I've been heading northeast, like you told me to, for a while." She looked bedraggled, her chocolate-colored hair a mess, dirty smudges on her cheeks, but she smiled at him and he thought her beautiful.

"Get up here. We have to be close to the coast." Trees dotted the landscape in a thick line ahead. They couldn't be far from water.

She handed him the reins before grabbing his hand. Brian settled her in front of him, wrapping his arm around her waist, pulling her close.

"Are you going to tell me what happened back there?"

"I can't."

She sighed. "I figured as much. At least you didn't try to." Charlie settled against his chest.

The ride to the evacuation point was rather anticlimactic. Charlie had been on a roller coaster since the kidnapping. After running from the guerrillas, narrowly escaping the predatory cats stalking them, twice, and then destroying the things, riding on a stolen horse was nothing to get excited about. Hell, if the guerrillas suddenly appeared in front of them, armed to the teeth and ready to fight, Charlie didn't think she could work up a good reaction.

"We're just about there. We'd better dismount and walk the rest of the way."

Brian stopped the horse and slid from its back, helping her down. Her thighs screamed in agony. Her legs were wobbly from riding for so long. Brian chuckled as she

tried to pull her knees closer together and failed. With a smack on the rump, he sent the horse back the way they'd come.

"Now I know why cowboys are bowlegged." She choked back a groan as he led her into the trees.

Charlie leaned on Brian, willing her lower body to get in gear. It took a while. They had to be near the ocean, the salty air pungent though Charlie couldn't see it, before her legs could hold her weight. But she didn't pull away. Deep down, she knew that once the rescue team did their job, they probably wouldn't be this close again.

They arrived on the beach without fanfare. Brian reconned the area, confirmed they were in the clear, and took out the vial he'd handed her back at the barn. When he popped the top, a blast of brilliant red light shot into the sky. With the beacon glowing above them, Brian settled himself on a piece of driftwood next to her.

In short order, Charlie spied a boat cutting across the waves. Something cut through the water in front of it, nearly invisible thanks to its gray color, but she saw it anyway. As the boat and its companion neared, she realized it was a seal.

Brian stood and she followed. The incoming vessel stopped a few hundred feet from shore and several of the occupants jumped into the water. The seal washed up on the beach and Brian headed for it. Charlie walked slowly behind him, but when the seal split down its belly and a beautiful woman emerged, she stopped dead.

Taking a page from his book, she yelled to get his attention. "For fuck's sake! Are these more of your 'special' friends?"

He turned around and shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah."

"Yeah? That's all I get?" Charlie glared at the woman, who at least had the decency to look embarrassed.

Five large men climbed from the water just as Brian reached the mystery woman. When he embraced her exuberantly, pressing a kiss to her lips, Charlie saw red. Jealousy exploded through her body, but a soul-searing agony quickly washed it away. *How could he sleep with me if he already had a girlfriend?*

She couldn't believe she'd been so stupid. Part of her said she was overreacting, that for all she knew the woman was his sister, but Charlie refused to listen. She'd known what they had couldn't last. Hell, Brian told her as much last night. So, she squared her shoulders and went to meet the rescue team. It was time to go home.

* * *

The knock on her door stirred Charlie out of her mope. Steeling herself for Brian, she was surprised to see the seal/woman from the beach, Lucia, on the other side.

"May I come in?"

Charlie wanted to be rude, but she didn't have the energy. She stepped back and swept her arm in front of her. Lucia came inside, shutting the door. "I think we got off on the wrong foot, Charlie."

"Why would you think that?"

Lucia gave her a look that said "can it" and Charlie sighed. "Look, it's none of my business anyway. Just chalk it up to a rough few days."

"There isn't anything going on between Brian and I, you know. We're practically related." Lucia settled herself in the only chair and motioned Charlie to join her. Charlie moved to her bunk and sat, drawing her legs beneath her.

"Like I said it's none of my business."

Lucia didn't say anything. After a couple of minutes, she nodded. "I didn't stop in to chat. We need to talk about this evening. About what you saw on the beach and in the jungle."

"I didn't see anything." Charlie had been around politicians and the government long enough to know all about deniability.

"I know. However, we have to be sure. No one alive in your world knows about us anymore. We need to keep it that way." Lucia gave her a small, honest smile.

"So what? You want to wipe out my memories?" At that moment, the idea held appeal. But Charlie didn't truly want to forget Brian.

"We can do that, if you like. But I'd rather have you sign a binding contract, of a sort."

"I'm listening." Charlie unfolded her legs and sat forward.

Lucia snapped her fingers and a glass materialized. A golden liquid filled it halfway. Charlie lifted a brow and pointed to the cup. "Nice trick."

Lucia laughed softly. "My gifts have their benefits. If you choose to drink this, you won't ever be able to talk about what you've seen. Physically, your mouth won't speak. Think of it as our gag clause."

"Literally." Both women laughed. "Hand it over."

Lucia complied. Charlie took a deep breath and tossed back the liquid. It tasted vaguely of honey. There were no fizzies, no fireworks this time. Instead, it warmed her. She handed the glass back.

"Did you see me slip my skin?"

Lucia's question startled Charlie and she automatically tried to respond. "Hmm mmm."

Lucia giggled. "Sorry. I just wanted to make sure. By the way, I'm a Selkie."

Charlie tried to frown, but her grin ruined the effect. "Very funny." They sat in a comfortable silence for a few minutes longer, before Lucia stood.

"We'll be back in Washington in a few hours. You might want to get some rest."

"Thanks, Lucia." Charlie gave her a small wave, and then lay back on the bed.

Lucia opened the door and gasped. "Brian, what are you doing here?"

"Uh, I, uh..." He shifted from foot to foot while he stammered. His eyes locked with Charlie's.

She took pity on him. "It's all right, Lucia."

The Selkie shot her a look of understanding before letting Brian in. She closed the door behind her, not that Charlie paid attention.

"What do you want?" She didn't bother to sit up.

"I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I'm fine. Is that all?"

"For fuck's sake, Charlie." He tightened his hands into fists.

Charlie stared into his eyes, seeing the pain, feeling it. He stalked to the bed, dropping to his knees beside it. He lifted his hand to her hair, brushing the locks off her forehead. "I haven't seen you all cleaned up before. You look beautiful."

It wasn't a declaration of undying love, but Charlie didn't care. She wanted this time with him. "Brian?"

"Yeah."

"Kiss me."

Chapter 14

Brian grinned like a rogue and pulled her off the bunk into his lap. "Definitely, Charlie."

He kissed her like his life depended on it. He burned her taste into his memory, a hint of honey, a dash of coffee, and a whole lot of sex. Taking her bottom lip between his teeth, he tugged, letting the plump flesh scrape over them before letting her go.

Charlie pulled back. "Get naked. Riding that horse gave me all sorts of ideas." She grinned lasciviously and slid from his lap, pulling the borrowed T-shirt and shorts off her body.

Brian rushed to do as she asked, grunting softly when she pounced on him, pressing his face between her full breasts. His cock was rock hard, as it seemed to have been since he met her. It rose up between them, brushing against her belly. The feel of her soft skin against his stiff shaft drew his balls tight.

Charlie rubbed her nipples across his mouth and he took the bait. Catching one hard tip between his lips, he suckled hard, flicking his tongue against the captured flesh. She moaned lustily, pressing her bottom against his cock. Her wet pussy glided along his length, nearly sending Brian into orbit.

He wanted to be gloved inside her body immediately. He settled his hands on her hips, moving her body over his. He looked up into her face. Her emerald eyes spoke volumes. Brian's emotions threatened to overwhelm him and he swallowed hard. But he didn't hide how he felt from her. He couldn't say the words, but he needed her to know.

Charlie smiled and rose to her knees. She swiveled her lower body until they were aligned, then slowly she sank onto his cock. The warm, wet glide of her body ignited Brian's senses. When his balls pressed against her ass, he groaned.

She lifted up and impaled herself more forcefully, pushing the air from his lungs. Her palms cupped his shoulders as she rode him, her head thrown back in ecstasy. Brian smoothed his hands over her waist and up her back, cupping her neck and pulling her down for a kiss.

One led to two, then three. They made love with their mouths while Charlie rode him. Her thighs quivered from the exertion, but she maintained her leisurely, sensual pace until Brian growled his need. "Harder, Charlie."

She tightened her grip on his shoulders and moved her hips faster, slamming her body onto his. Her pussy bathed his cock and balls with juices and her forceful cries rang in his ears. Brian shifted his legs, pulling them beneath his body, changing their positions.

He held her hips, cradling her lush ass against his thighs. Charlie leaned back, her shoulders barely touching the floor, and pressed the backs of her legs to his chest. Brian looked down, savage hunger burning in his blood at the sight of her pussy filled with his cock. He held her still, moving his hands from her hips to high on her thighs. Wrapping an arm around each leg, Brian drew back and rammed his cock deep.

Charlie yelled her pleasure. "God!" Her hands scrabbled along his legs, searching for purchase. She found it in the meat of his thighs and curled her fingers hard against the muscles.

Brian moaned, powerless to stop the rising speed of his thrusts. He slammed home, deeper, harder, watching the juices of her body cover them both. He closed his eyes when her pussy tightened on his cock, undulating around him, milking his body. He wanted to come, his balls ached with the need to empty his seed inside her tight, clutching sex, but he held back.

Charlie screamed beneath him, her hips fighting against his hold. Brian watched her body as she came, the hot flush of release spreading over her skin, the way she continued to scream soundlessly when the last of her breath left her. He pulled her thighs farther apart and leaned forward, pounding, hammering, staking his claim on his woman.

Charlie arched in his grip, gasping for air. Her hips pumped against his, her orgasm ebbing and swelling repeatedly. Tears ran unchecked down her cheeks as she gave in to each new crest, as she gave herself to him. She heaved beneath him, her pussy undulating around him, drawing him in so deep, Brian didn't know where he ended and she began.

The beginning of his own orgasm shivered over his skin. Brian didn't know if he could control his reactions, didn't think he wanted to. He didn't care who heard him. If this was the last time he'd feel the swell of her body around his, Brian would give her an unfettered response. Sparks zinged up and down his spine. He felt a blush rise over his skin, and he gave in to the powerful sensations building within.

As the last shudders tore through her body, his balls drew tight against his body. Electric fire tore through him and Brian didn't hold back. "Charlie!" He bellowed her name, repeating it each time his cock jerked and flooded her with more of his come.

He didn't stop moving inside of her until his cock and balls were slippery with their mixed release. If the floor wasn't cold, he'd have moved to his back and pulled her onto his chest, keeping his cock buried deep inside her. But the floor of a submarine wasn't a pleasant place to sleep. Grudgingly, he withdrew from Charlie's heat and moved them to her narrow bunk.

She lifted heavy lids to look at him and Brian kissed her. There were a lot of things to say, but nothing would change who they were or the ocean of differences separating them. Despite the bittersweet truth, Brian refused to leave her until he had to. This might be their last night together, but he intended to make certain it was one Charlie Thompson would never forget.

Chapter 15

Charlie didn't know how Lucia managed it, but there was no media circus, no Secret Service, no one to greet her when she landed at Ronald Reagan. A car was waiting for her on the tarmac. The driver didn't speak. He simply drove her to the hidden entrance of the White House and dropped her off.

Jacob Thompson stood at the end of the tunnel. When Charlie saw him, she broke into a run. Her father did too and they met in a powerful hug. The tears came then and Jacob soothed her, like he should have so many times, before helping her inside.

The next few weeks passed in a depressing blur for Charlie. Initially, there had been meetings and interviews with all sorts of government officials. They wanted to know what happened, who had rescued her. She'd told them an Irishman had coordinated her escape, but that she couldn't tell them who he worked for or how they'd found her.

Charlie played up the trauma of being kidnapped, claiming not to remember much about her rescuer. She did give them all she could about the guerrillas. For once, being the President's daughter came in handy. After nearly a week of meetings, her father said she was done rehashing it and that was that.

The one bright spot was the reconciliation between her and her dad. He'd begged for her forgiveness, she'd done the same, and they had started fresh. Their renewed closeness was the only thing keeping Charlie from hiding in her apartment all day, eating ice cream and watching chick flicks.

She returned to her job at the bookstore, but where she'd once found peace, now she felt unsettled. She wanted to use her degree for something. She had a life she

needed to live. And not the way she had been. Being with Brian made her see how her anger and grief had affected her choices.

He was in her thoughts every day, in her dreams every night. There was a constant ache in her chest. She didn't just miss him, she felt incomplete without him. After another afternoon spent among the stacks of her job, Charlie dragged herself home. She was exhausted, lonely, and heartsick. Some chocolate cookies and bed sounded good.

Outside her apartment door was a small envelope. Charlie picked it up and turned it over in her hands. Her name, in loose, flowing black letters, took up most of the front. She shrugged, turning the key in the lock and heading inside.

Her place was a mess. Charlie felt a little shameful of the disaster area, though that didn't stop her from tossing her coat onto a disheveled pile near the door. She dropped her purse and the envelope on the small dining room table and made her way to the kitchen.

Charlie rummaged through the cupboards, searching for some cookies. She came up with none. Sighing, she opened the fridge. It was nearly empty. "For fuck's sake." She smiled slightly. Her father didn't particularly care for her new favorite phrase. But Charlie didn't care. Saying the words eased the pain in her chest for a moment.

She decided to order in. Tomorrow she'd call a cleaning company and go to the store. *Sure, you will. You've been saying that for a week and a half.* Walking back into the dining room, she spied the letter. Curiosity begging to be assuaged, Charlie picked the missive up and pulled open the flap.

She pulled out an index card sized sheet of paper. "Charlie, meet me for lunch tomorrow at the Café Redmond. The directions are on the back. See you at one. Lucia." Charlie turned the card over and looked at the directions. She'd never been to the restaurant Lucia suggested, hadn't even heard of it. According to the map, it was in a small Virginia town about an hour outside of Washington.

Charlie wasn't sure if she was ready to socialize, but she wanted to see Lucia. Mind made up, Charlie left the dining room for the bedroom. She called her favorite

Chinese take out place while she packed a small bag. Lucia might have invited her for lunch, but it sparked an idea in Charlie's mind. Getting away for a while sounded like a good idea. She called her dad to let him know she was going out of town for a few days. He sounded worried, but he told her to have a good time.

Later, settled in the bath, her sweet and sour shrimp set on a tray beside the tub, Charlie started to think about her life and Brian. She didn't understand all the things that had happened in Venezuela. Hell, she didn't understand some of the things that happened afterward. None of that mattered.

She loved Brian O'Connor and she was dying a little each day without him. Maybe he felt the same way, maybe he didn't. The one thing she was certain of was that she had to stop moping. Charlene Thompson wasn't a "things happen" woman. She was a "make things happen" woman.

And tomorrow, she was going to make Lucia help her get to Brian.

Chapter 16

"Charlie!" Lucia Malholland waved happily from a booth nearby. Charlie waved back, smiling to the girl at the door before heading toward her lunch date.

"Lucia, it's good to see you again." The two women embraced. As they settled back into their seats, a waiter brought two salads.

"I hope you don't mind, I ordered for you. Chef's salad."

"It looks great, Lucia." Charlie smiled and focused on Lucia. Her stomach was in knots and the hair on her neck stood on end.

"Charlie, what's wrong?" Lucia sounded concerned, but her eyes weren't.

"Nothing's wrong." Charlie cocked a brow.

Lucia slid one hand across the table. She took Charlie's fingers in her own, squeezing gently. "It's all right. Tell me what you see."

Charlie closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She frowned at Lucia before scanning the restaurant.

Strange looking people filled the place. She racked her brain to place many of them. "I think I see a couple of centaurs, a werewolf, and that couple there have wings and glitter. But of course, I can't see that, can I?"

"Thank you, Charlie." Lucia released her hand and sat back. She raised her hand and made a circling gesture and the odd looking people left. They all stopped by the table to smile at Charlie before leaving.

"What the hell's going on?" Charlie felt like she'd just been tested, but she wasn't sure she'd passed.

"You did. Pass that is." Lucia grinned and lifted a forkful of lettuce to her lips.

"You can read my mind?" Charlie's stomach growled, though she didn't feel very hungry now.

"Only strong, surface thoughts. I'm sorry, it's rude." Lucia dug in to her lunch, motioning Charlie to eat as well.

Since the other woman obviously wasn't going to talk until they'd eaten, Charlie picked up her fork. The food was delicious, but nervousness took most of her appetite. When the waiter reappeared to take their dishes and deliver coffee and small cakes, Charlie got to the point. "What's going on, Lucia? Why'd you invite me to lunch?"

"I'm going to tell you something that might surprise you. Then I'm going to ask you a question. You only have a few minutes to answer."

"Then get to it." Charlie leaned against the back of her seat and folded her arms. She wasn't being confrontational, but she wanted answers.

"When you saw your mother die, you acquired a talent few humans possess. You can see magic. When we met in South America, I suspected your gift was even more special than simple mage-sight. You saw me slip skin and you shouldn't have."

Charlie didn't know how to respond, so she nodded. What Lucia said was nuts, and a few months ago Charlie would have told her as much. Now, well, she listened without comment.

"I suspect you've seen a lot of strange things since your power manifested." Lucia paused.

"Maybe. I just thought it was an active imagination." Actually, she'd chalked those things up as stress-induced hallucinations. Otherwise, she'd have been crazy and that wouldn't have been good for her father's career.

"Hmm. You have trust issues, don't you?"

"What do you mean?" Charlie wiggled uncomfortably. She didn't like where these questions were going.

"I mean you prize honesty. It's extremely important to you. With a father as powerful as yours, I imagine you've heard plenty of lies, been lied to often."

"Politics are politics."

"I know." A sad smile flashed across Lucia's face. "It's your need for honesty that makes you so unique, Charlie. You have the ability to see through magic. All the

people you pointed out earlier looked like humans to everyone else here. Everyone but you. You saw through their glammers."

"And that's why you invited me to lunch."

Lucia nodded. "It's time for my question. Would you like to join us?"

Charlie's breath left her in a rush. "That's crazy, Lucia! I'm the President's daughter."

"The logistics would have to be worked out, but if you say yes, Charlie, we'll do it."

"What does Brian think about this?" Mentioning his name squeezed her heart painfully.

"He doesn't know. No one, except for the head of the group, is aware I'm here asking. We don't have much time, Charlie. Yes or no?"

Her head spun. This was the single most surreal experience of her life. Charlie leaned an elbow on the table, pressing her forehead to her palm. One question blazed like a neon sign in her mind, so she asked it. "Would this be all I do for your group? Because frankly, I don't want to be used. I can get that in Washington."

"You have a double degree, Charlie. Your gift won't be the focus of your career with us." Lucia smiled warmly.

Charlie nodded decisively. Her choice was crazy, but it felt right. She felt good. "Then my answer is yes."

Chapter 17

There was a frantic buzz in the office and Brian welcomed the distraction. It'd been six weeks since he'd left Charlie. Hell would be a fine step up from what his life was like now.

Curious about the fuss people were making, he paged his assistant. "Joe, can you come in here?"

"Yes, sir."

Brian sat up in his chair and folded his arms on the desk. His fingertips played over a pen, rolling it back and forth while he waited for his assistant. A knock sounded and Joe Maguire entered. "What's up, sir?"

"Do you know what's got this place so jazzed?"

"Not much, sir."

"Well, spill. I feel like I'm completely out of the loop." Brian stood and walked around the desk. He perched a hip on the corner, waiting for Joe's answer.

His assistant looked a little uncomfortable. *What's he got to be nervous for?* Chalking it up to the atmosphere, Brian motioned the other man to speak. "Well, sir, Colonel Malholland has a new recruit."

"And? Lucia gets new recruits all the time. Metamorphs are fairly plentiful."

"Yes, sir. But rumor has it that the new person isn't joining the Metamorphic Class because they can shapeshift."

"Really?"

"No, sir. According to what I heard, the newbie is human."

Brian widened his eyes. A human in the Corps was unheard of. It was unbelievable. "Surely the human has some preternatural ability?"

"Well, sir, that's the crazy part. Supposedly, this human can see *through* magic. They can't use it, but they aren't a mage at all. But they have mage-sight and it's so enhanced they can actually see the truth behind any spells, shields, glamours." A tiny bit of fear seeped into Joe's voice.

Brian couldn't blame him. A knot of apprehension balled in his gut. A human who could detect magic was rare indeed. Even those with mage-sight couldn't see through spells. "Well, I suppose that would explain the hubbub. Thanks, Joe."

"You're welcome, sir." He turned to leave, then spun around with a snap of his fingers. "Oh. Colonel Malholland called right before you paged me. She wants to know if you're free for lunch."

"Of course. Let me know where she wants to meet."

"Yes, sir." Joe left the office and Brian stood from his perch.

If Lucia really recruited a human, Brian wanted to know. He didn't think for one second that her offer to lunch was a coincidence. A human with mage-sight wasn't something Lucia, or anyone, had a lot of experience with and Brian assumed she'd want to speak with a mage about it. He was glad she'd asked him, instead of Natalie Rubenesso, his boss. Their shared Irish heritage made Lucia like him better.

"Sir?" Joe rang in.

"Go ahead."

"Colonel Malholland said to meet her at the bistro on Fourth at one thirty."

Brian looked at his watch. He had just enough time to get there. "Affirmative. I'm leaving now."

* * *

"Hey, Lucia. How's it going?" Brian leaned down to peck her cheek before taking his seat.

"It's going well, Brian. How are you?" Concern flickered in her gray eyes.

"I'm fine." He resisted the urge to rub his chest. *Maybe someday I'll be able to think about her without aching.*

"I asked you to lunch because I want you to meet someone."

"Your mysterious new recruit?" Brian wiggled his brows, drawing a chuckle from Lucia.

"Yes. I actually set this lunch up for the two of you." She looked past him, over his shoulder, and smiled broadly. Shifting her focus back to Brian, she stood. "I'll leave you to your lunch. And don't worry, Brian, no one expects you back for a week."

"What? Lucia, what are you talking about?"

"Major O'Connor. It's nice to meet you."

Brian froze. He knew that voice better than his own. He closed his eyes briefly, praying this wasn't a sick joke, and turned in his seat to face the speaker. "Charlie."

He stood and she threw herself at him. Brian wrapped his arms around her like a drowning man clings to a life preserver. His hands clutched her shoulders, her back, her waist, each touch proving she was there. He buried his face in her hair, looking over her toward Lucia, thanking her with his eyes.

The strong Selkie looked happy and sad. Her eyes shone with moisture. She gave him a nod, then turned to leave. Brian knew Lucia's secret, why it was hard for her to watch him reunite with Charlie. Her pain had nothing to do with them and everything to do with who she was.

"For fuck's sake, Brian. You're crushing me."

Charlie's watery voice turned his thoughts from Lucia. He eased back from her, running his hands down her arms. "You've picked up some bad language, Charlie."

She smiled and tried to blink away her tears. "I learned them from the man I love. I think he'll forgive me any bad habits."

His heart surged in his chest. "You love me?"

"I love you."

Brian crushed her to him once more. "God, Charlie, I love you too. It's crazy, but I do." Leaning back, he turned her face to his and took her mouth.

They kissed for a long time, relearning each other, rejoicing in being together. Their tongues swirled around one another. Their fingers tangled in each other's hair.

"Get a room!" someone nearby suggested.

Brian broke the kiss to glare at the man.

Charlie distracted him. "I've missed you so much. I have so many things to tell you."

Excitement lit her expressive eyes and Brian grinned. "I want to hear it all. I'm curious about this talent you have."

"I can't wait to explain it to you. But first, let's get out of here." Mischief and desire warmed her skin, flushing her cheeks.

"I like the way you think, Charlie." He laughed aloud and kissed her again.

They left the restaurant hand in hand, giggling like fools. Brian took her back to his apartment and they barely made it in the door before clothes began flying. Charlie ripped his shirt off, frantically pressing her mouth to his chest while Brian popped the buttons of her blouse and snapped the front closure of her bra. "Hurry, Brian."

He wiggled his brows and brought a hand to her breast. She gasped when he pinched it and returned the favor. Groaning, laughing, they made their way to his bedroom.

Chapter 18

"So, how did you explain your job change to your da?" Brian filled her coffee mug while he asked.

"Lucia did. Honestly, I don't care. I'm finally going to put my degrees to good use." She smiled at him across the table.

They'd just started to eat their breakfast when the doorbell rang.

Charlie raised a brow at Brian. "Who would be at your house at eight am on a Friday morning?"

"I've no idea, love." He pushed his chair back, but didn't get the chance to get up.

"Brian Magnus O'Connor!" a deep, feminine voice shouted from the front of the house.

"Ah, for fuck's sake!" He slouched down into his chair, burying his face in his hands.

"Magnus?" Charlie giggled.

"Don't make me call for ya again, lad!" The warning tone in her second shout brought Brian to an upright position.

"I'm in the kitchen, Mum."

"Oh my God, your mother is here?" Charlie grabbed the front of her robe, clutching it tightly.

"If only. She's probably brought half the family."

Neither of them had time to prepare. A moment later, several red-haired, loud, Irish folks burst into the kitchen. An older man swept Charlie up into a bear hug. She assumed the fellow was Brian's father. His mother pinched her cheeks then kissed

them. Brian's sisters hugged her heartily as did his brother, though she had to slap his hands away.

"Da, Mum, what in the name of heaven are ya doin' here?" Charlie felt a sweep of lust at Brian's thickened accent.

"Ya know how your mum is, boy-o. She sensed we was needed here, an' so we came." His father smiled merrily and thumped his son on the back.

"Well, uh..." He floundered and Charlie came to his rescue.

"Mr. and Mrs. O'Connor, it's fantastic to have you here. Brian and I have a few things we must do this afternoon, but what about if we meet for supper?" Charlie employed every bit of politicking and manners she could manage to charm his family.

"Ah, Brian, she's a real gem." His mother kissed his cheek.

"I know, Mum."

"All right, everyone, out ye get!" There were general grumbles, but the crowd thinned quickly. "We're at the hotel down the street, son."

"We'll meet ya there 'round six. Love ya, Mum."

Mrs. O'Connor beamed, stopping to squeeze Charlie's hand, before she followed her family out.

"Charlie, I love you." Relief washed over his face as he took her in his arms.

Laughter burst from her lips. "I know you do. I love you too. Now, tell me about your family. They seem very 'special'."

Brian sighed with a grin. "You could say that."

Emma Ray Garrett

“...and I -- I took the road less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”

- *The Road Not Taken*, Robert Frost

The last line from award-winning author Emma Ray's favorite poem pretty much sums up her life. Her tendency to do her own thing is what her friends and family love best, and least, about her. Chaos is a constant in the Garrett home, which currently houses three intelligent, energetic children, a devoted husband, her grandmother, and a very large, very lazy, white tom-cat.

No matter how busy, Emma Ray writes every day. If she didn't, she says they'd put her in a white coat with buckles. Fans can contact her at emmaraygarrett@changelingpress.com or they can visit her website at www.romance-the-night.com