



TRANSFORMATION

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Chapter One

A full moon glowed whitely through the dark tangle of branches overhead. Wind whispered through the leaves.

Maggie pushed aside a branch as she trudged through the dense woods, wishing she had worn something with long sleeves. Her arms were covered with scratches. Her feet were sore, she was tired, hungry, cold and....

Maggie stopped herself before she could run through the entire mental litany of discomforts. Dwelling on it wouldn't make her feel any better.

Stopping, she cupped her hands around her mouth and called out, "Stacy! Brian!" for what must have been the twentieth time. As always, there was no reply.

Maggie lowered her hands and sighed. A few hours ago, walking just behind Stacy and Brian, she had stopped beside the trail to look at a paw-print in the mud. A paw-print as big as her hand. She'd studied it, wondering if it had been the work of practical jokesters. Surely there was nothing *that* big in this forest, was there? She'd intended to tell her companions what she'd found, but when she looked up, they had been nowhere in sight. They'd probably just kept walking, assuming she'd catch up.

Maggie had tried to follow their trail and gotten hopelessly lost. She'd spent the past few hours wandering, looking for something familiar, feeling out of her element and increasingly frightened. Maybe she should have just stayed put. Too late now.

She had no way to contact anyone, no idea where she was. Her heartbeat quickened. "Stacy!" she shouted again, almost screaming. "Brian! Where *are* you, damn it?"

Something rustled in the nearby underbrush, and she gasped. Taking a deep breath, she placed a hand over her racing heart. "Calm down," she muttered to herself. The sound of her own voice made her feel a little better. "You're in Wisconsin, not the African jungle. There aren't any lions or tigers."

Stacy had laughed when Maggie asked if there was anything dangerous in the forest. Stacy was always laughing at her silly fears. She supposed that was typical of big sisters, though ... and Stacy's boyfriend, Brian, was the same way. They both had a talent for making Maggie feel much younger than her twenty-four years.

She started walking again ... and heard another rustle in the bushes, this one louder and closer. Her breath caught in her throat. Whatever it was, it sounded as big as a person. "Hello?" she called, her voice sounding very loud in the silence.

No response.

Maybe there weren't any dangerous animals in these woods, but that didn't mean there might not be dangerous *people*. She supposed a forest wasn't the most likely place to run into a would-be murderer or rapist, but still....

Maggie's gaze darted around, looking for something she could use as a weapon. She spotted a baseball-sized rock, with a sharp point, on the ground. Slowly, she reached down and picked it up, curling her fingers around it tightly. Her heart was in her throat, fluttering like a trapped bird.

A pair of eyes gleamed in the shadows ... then vanished.

Maggie swallowed hard. Her heartbeat filled her ears. “Who is it?” she called out sharply. “Who’s following me? Brian? Stacy? Is this some kind of joke? If it is, it’s not funny!”

Silence. Had she imagined it?

Her tongue darted out to wet her dry lips as she stared into the shadows. Again, she saw the gleam of golden eyes in the moonlight, and a burst of adrenaline jolted her system like electricity. She hadn’t imagined it. The eyes were still there, looking straight at her. Maggie took a step back, breathing rapidly.

A dark form crept out of the shadows. It was a cougar, huge and sleek, its jaws open to reveal rows of gleaming white fangs. “Oh my God,” whispered Maggie.

The cat growled softly, licked its lips with a wet, pink tongue, and crouched. Muscles bunched under tawny fur as a long tail flicked back and forth.

She had seen housecats crouch like that when they were about to pounce on a toy, or a bit of string. Except now, she was the string ... and judging from the hungry look in those yellow eyes, it intended to do more than bat her around with a paw.

Maggie opened her mouth to scream, but before she could even draw a breath, the cougar’s paws cannoned into her, knocking her to the ground. Sharp teeth pierced her shoulder, and pain exploded through her. She’d never felt such intense pain. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. Reacting through pure instinct, she lifted her free arm, her fingers still curled around the jagged rock, and smashed it into the cat’s face. The cougar leapt off her with a yowl and staggered sideways. One wide yellow eye stared at her. Blood darkened the other. The enormous jaws stretched wide as it screamed, a wounded, enraged sound. A cold jolt of fear shot through Maggie, and she struggled to her feet, panting. Warm blood flowed from her wounded shoulder, down her side. The shoulder throbbed with a deep, searing agony.

The cougar pounced, knocking her to the ground again, planting huge paws on her chest. She was pinned, gasping for breath beneath the cougar’s greater weight. Its yellow eye glared down at her, blazing. One paw raised high into the air, curved claws extended....

Then something huge and dark collided with the cat, knocking it aside, and the suffocating pressure on her chest was gone. Maggie tried to sit up, but a wave of pain and dizziness washed over her, and she sank to the ground, her vision fading to black. Before her consciousness slipped away, she caught a blurry glimpse of two feline shapes circling each other, ears pinned back, teeth bared. Then the blackness closed in around her, and she sank into a deep sea of nothingness.

* * * *

Maggie awoke on a soft bed, in a small room with a window. Sunlight spilled into a golden puddle on the floor, and she could hear birds chirping. Aside from the window, the only light came from a small oil-lamp on the table beside her. She looked around, blinking, groggy and disoriented. Her shoulder ached. Slowly, she lifted her other arm to pull the covers aside and saw that someone had bandaged the wounds. The faintly bitter, herbal smell of medicinal salve hung in the air. She also saw that she was naked from the waist up, save for her thin, cotton bra.

“Awake, I see,” said a deep voice.

Maggie gasped, quickly pulling the covers over herself and clutching them tight

against her chest. A tall, imposing figure of a man stood at the other end of the room, leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his broad chest. He watched her closely, his expression unreadable, his eyes lost in shadow. "Who are you?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly. "Where am I?"

He approached her bed, walking slowly, his eyes still focused on her.

Maggie sat up, the covers slipping away. The sudden movement sent pain ripping through her shoulder, and she gasped, clutching her arm.

Strong hands gripped her arms, pushing her back to the bed. She must have looked frightened, for he said, more quietly, "I'm not going to hurt you. Just lay still."

She blinked. The man's eyes were an odd, bright yellow-green, striking against his tanned skin. His hair--long and dark, with a slight wave--was pulled back into a loose tail. The hair was so beautiful that it might have looked girlish on another man, but there was nothing feminine about his face. His brows were thick and dark, his mouth firm, his jaw roughened with stubble.

"Where am I?" asked Maggie.

"You're in my cabin," he said. "About a quarter-mile from the spot where you were attacked by that cougar. I brought you here and treated your wounds." A slight smile softened the stern mouth. "And my name is Justin, by the way." He released her arms. She could still feel the warmth of his hands lingering on her bare skin.

Maggie struggled to focus her mind. Confusion clouded her thoughts. "Why aren't I in a hospital?" she asked.

"There was no way to call an ambulance," he said.

"You don't have any phones here?"

He shook his head. "The nearest one is in town."

"You could have driven me..."

"I don't have a car. Not here, anyway. If I'd tried to carry you, you would have died from blood loss before we got there."

"Oh."

His eyes looked deeply, steadily into hers. It was almost disconcerting, that gaze. Most people didn't maintain direct eye contact for that long. "Are you in any pain?" he asked. His voice stirred something warm in her belly. It was deep and soft as velvet.

"I'm all right. I mean, it hurts, but not as badly as I would have thought."

Maggie looked around again. Wood walls. Wood floor. A bed, a table, a chair, and not much else. She swallowed, suddenly aware that her mouth and throat were painfully dry. "May I please have some water?" she asked.

He left the room and returned a minute later with a tin cup, which he handed to her. She took a long drink and sighed with relief. The water was like cool silk on her dry, aching throat. "So ... do you live here?" she asked.

"No." He sat down in the wooden chair next to the bed. "I come here sometimes to get away from things."

"What things?"

"Ringing phones, barking dogs, the smell of exhaust fumes. Civilization." He stared off into space a moment. "This cabin belonged to my grandfather. I'm the only one who knows about it. I like that there's somewhere I can go where no one can reach me." He glanced at Maggie's face, and a smile gentled his stern features once again.

"I'm probably making myself sound like an antisocial psychopath, aren't I?"

“No, not at all,” said Maggie, though it had occurred to her that if this guy *was* a psycho, the police would never find her in time. Hell, if he was a psycho, this cabin probably had bodies lined up under the floorboards like sardines. She swallowed, suddenly very aware that she was half-naked. Even under the covers, she felt very vulnerable, very exposed. “Can I have my shirt?”

“It’s in shreds,” he said. “Wait here. You can borrow one of mine.” He left the room again and returned with a long-sleeved, button-down shirt that’s original color had faded to a washed-out gray. It was almost identical to the one he wore. “Do you need help getting into it?” he asked.

“No, I think I’m all right,” she said, taking the shirt ... but when she lifted her arms to pull it on, she winced at the flare of pain in her shoulders.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” he said. His voice was very close to her ear. It seemed to caress her, sliding down her spine like a gentle finger. “Sit up,” he said. “I’ll give you a hand.”

Maggie sat up, her face flushed hotly. She glanced down, uncomfortably aware that the slight chill in the air had caused her nipples to harden. Her breasts were on the small side, but her nipples were rather large and prominent ... hence her preference for loose, baggy clothes.

His gaze grazed briefly across her breasts, but didn’t linger. He unbuttoned the shirt and helped her into it, sliding the sleeves over her arms, then buttoning it up again. She watched his long, tanned fingers working the buttons.

An image flashed through her head--those same fingers, caressing her stiff nipples through her bra, pinching them lightly, then rubbing circles around them with warm, firm thumbs.

She shook her head slightly, as if to clear the image away. What on Earth had triggered a thought like that? Well, all right, he was good-looking, but considering the situation--being wounded and stranded in the middle of the woods--sex should have been the last thing on her mind. But there was something about him. It wasn’t just his handsomeness. He exuded a primal sensuality that was difficult to ignore.

He finished buttoning the shirt and straightened, stepping back.

Maggie was a small woman, and he was a fairly large man. His shirt hung from her frame in baggy folds, and the sleeves hid all but her fingers. Still, she was covered, at least. “Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t mention it.” He smiled, showing a hint of white teeth, and Maggie’s eyes widened.

His canine teeth were unusually sharp. Almost like fangs.

Don’t be stupid, she thought. It was her imagination, making her jumpy again. She was seeing things, surely.

“Something wrong?” asked Justin.

“No,” she said quickly, fingering a button on her sleeve. “No, I’m fine.”

“I think you’re a little nervous,” he said. “I suppose I can’t blame you.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“You’re in an isolated cabin in the forest with a strange man. And you’re injured. No one knows you’re here. I think anyone in your situation would be nervous.”

Maggie sat still and silent, not daring to breathe.

“But I meant what I said,” he continued. “I’m not going to hurt you. I’ll hike out

to town today and contact the authorities and a hospital, so you can get that wound looked at properly.”

Maggie exhaled softly. “I’ll come with you,” she said.

“No. You shouldn’t move from bed yet. If you put too much strain on your body, your shoulder will start bleeding again. Do you have anyone looking for you?”

Maggie nodded. “I was with my sister and her boyfriend. We got separated while we were hiking.”

“Do you want me to call them, too? I’m sure they’ll be relieved to know you’re all right.”

“Yes, please.” She pulled a folded slip of paper from her pocket. “Here’s the number of Stacy’s cell-phone.”

He took it and stood, so that she was at eye-level with his groin. She couldn’t help noticing that his jeans were rather tight, and that the package they displayed was quite impressive. He was, to put it less delicately, hung like an ox.

Maggie looked quickly away. What on Earth was wrong with her?

“You’re probably hungry,” he said. “I’ll bring you something to eat before I go, though I’m afraid there’s not much to choose from. Mostly canned foods.”

“I could eat anything right now,” she said, truthfully. She hadn’t realized it until that moment, but she was starving.

He nodded. “Give me a moment.” He left the room, moving with an odd, gliding grace. It wasn’t the way most people walked. It was more like the lazy stroll of a big cat. Maybe she just had cats on the brain.

Maggie lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. She felt as if she’d stumbled into a movie, or something. Getting attacked by hungry cougars and rescued by strange but remarkably handsome men was just not something that happened in real life, or at least, not in *her* dull little life.

She touched her shoulder lightly and winced. The pain was real enough, though not nearly as bad as it should have been. Unless she moved the shoulder, it was only a dull ache, like a bruise. That was another odd thing, now that she thought about it. The wound had been excruciating when she lost consciousness, and it hadn’t been *that* long ago. Had he given her painkillers when she was asleep? But why would he have such powerful painkillers laying around the house?

Justin returned carrying a plate. There was a small heap of sliced peaches from a can, strips of jerky, and a stack of wheat crackers. He set it on a table.

“Thank you,” said Maggie. She picked up a cracker and nibbled the edge. She had been ravenous a moment ago, but now, she found, her stomach was so filled with fluttery nervousness that her appetite had fled. Justin sat, watching her with greenish yellow eyes. Those eyes seemed unusually bright in the dim light of the room, as if they absorbed the meager light from the oil lamp and held it in their depths. Like a cat’s.

Maggie swallowed. Her mouth felt dry. Her gaze traveled lower. The first few buttons of his shirt had been left undone, exposing a bit of his chest and a few curls of short, dark hair. Even with his clothes on, it was obvious from his lean, muscular build that he kept himself in shape. His scent--a warm, male scent--tickled her nostrils. She couldn’t remember every being so aware of someone’s *smell* before. She realized that her heart was beating quickly. Her entire body felt unusually sensitive, every nerve alive and tingling. It was surreal, like being in a dream.

She looked at his long hands, resting on his thighs. His left sleeve had bunched up around his elbow, leaving part of his forearm exposed. It was bandaged, strips of linen wrapped around the arm. Blood had soaked through in spots and dried to a dull, rusty brown. “What happened?” she asked.

He glanced down at the arm. “It’s nothing. I slipped and cut myself when I was chopping firewood.”

“Oh.” The answer didn’t ring true. Her brow furrowed. Memories flickered in her brain, like light gleaming through fog. It seemed suddenly, somehow important to remember exactly what had happened before she passed out. “When you found me--was there one cat, or two?”

“Just the one,” he said. “I heard some strange noises outside, so I grabbed my rifle and came to see what was going on. I saw the cat on top of you. I didn’t want to shoot it--I was afraid of hitting you accidentally--so I fired into the air, and the cougar ran off.”

“Really?”

He smiled with one corner of his mouth. “What’s so unbelievable about that? You didn’t think I fought it off with my bare hands, did you?”

“No, it’s just ... I could have sworn there was another cat. Right before I lost consciousness, I saw it attack the first one.”

“Well, I only saw one,” said Justin. His expression was calm, but there was a slight tension in his shoulders, his posture, that had not been there a few minutes ago. He stood. “I should be going. I’m sure your sister is worried sick about you by now.”

“Okay.” She paused. “Thank you. For helping me.”

He looked once more into her eyes, and her breath caught in her throat. She could feel the weight of that gaze in the secret, hollow places deep inside her. Eyes like that, she thought, should be illegal. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“It’s Maggie.”

“What does that stand for?”

“Huh?”

“It’s a nickname, isn’t it?” His voice was low, patient, mildly amused. “What’s your full name?”

“Oh. Margaret,” she said. She chuckled slightly, awkwardly. “I’ve never liked either one, really. They both sound so ... I don’t know. So prissy.”

“Margaret is a lovely name,” he said. “So is Maggie. It doesn’t sound prissy at all.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

“Just the truth.” He smiled slightly and turned to go.

“Wait,” she said.

He paused, looking over his shoulder.

“Um.” She cleared her throat. “Could you show me where the bathroom is, please?”

He pointed to a chamber pot in the corner of the room.

“You’re kidding,” she said.

“No indoor plumbing here.”

“You really *do* like to rough it, don’t you?”

“I like to prove to myself that I can exist without relying on modern

conveniences,” he said. “And this cabin is about as close to nature as you can get without moving into a cave.”

“A rugged individualist, huh?” she asked, a note of laughter in her voice.

“Yes. Though not entirely by choice.”

Maggie frowned. What did *that* mean?

Without another word, he turned and walked out of the room, still moving with that smooth, eerily graceful stride.

Chapter Two

As soon as he'd left the cabin, Justin returned immediately to the spot where the girl had been attacked. He had to know whether his suspicions were true.

The cougar had staggered off, wounded, into the forest. He could still see its tracks in the soft earth, along with a few dollops of blood on the ground. He followed them, until the tracks began to change. They grew longer and thinner, stretching out, until they more resembled human than feline tracks.

They *were* human tracks.

"Damn," Justin whispered.

That hadn't been an ordinary cougar. It was a were-cat. And that meant the girl was almost certainly infected with lycanthropy.

He stood, staring down at the tracks. Had it been an ordinary cat, he would have done exactly what he'd said that he'd do--go straight to town and inform the authorities of what had happened. Then the girl would have been taken to a hospital to get some proper medical attention, and he likely never would have seen her again.

But as things stood....

He couldn't just let her go, to discover the horrible secret on her own. He had to prepare her. She would think he was insane, but he had to make her believe.

He turned and headed back to the cabin.

* * * *

When he entered the bedroom, Maggie was sitting on the bed, staring out the window.

Even bandaged and disheveled, with her long, straight brown hair in disarray, she was very attractive. The oversized shirt had slipped down on one side to reveal her smooth, pale shoulder and the delicate hollow above her collarbone. She looked up at him, her chocolate brown eyes meeting his, and a faint, pink flush rose into her cheeks. Those eyes had an almost fawn-like vulnerability, framed by thick, silky lashes.

He was seized by a sudden, violent urge to walk across the room, pull her into his arms and kiss her, hard. He shoved the urge aside. He felt like an animal for even thinking about it: She was wounded, for God's sake. But still, the desire was there. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"You know, it's odd," she said. "My shoulder feels completely better." She flexed the arm. "It's like the wound was never there in the first place. But it hasn't had nearly enough time to heal."

Justin was silent. Lycanthropes had the ability to heal flesh-wounds within hours. It was the final proof.

"I guess the wound wasn't too deep," she continued. "But still, that wouldn't explain this, would it?" She unwrapped the bandages. Where the gash had been, there was only a thin, white scar. Even that, Justin knew, would probably be gone within the day. "What on Earth did you do to make it heal so quickly?" she asked.

"I cleaned and bandaged it," he said. "Nothing special."

“So weird,” she murmured. A long moment of silence crept by. “So,” she said, looking at him, “did you forget something?”

“Hmm?”

“You came back.”

He paused. “I had something to tell you, actually. Something which may be difficult for you to accept.”

Maggie’s brow furrowed slightly. “What?”

He took a deep breath. There was really no tactful way to tell someone they’d become a lycanthrope. He looked at her puzzled face. “The cat that attacked you was not an ordinary cougar.”

“What are you talking about? What else could it have been?”

“It was a were-cougar,” he said.

Maggie blinked. For a moment, her eyes went a little unfocused. “A what?”

“Were-cougar.”

“You mean like a werewolf?”

He nodded.

“You’re joking,” she said flatly.

“No,” he said.

“You’re talking about something that changes from human to animal every full moon? Is that what you mean?”

“That’s what I mean.”

“But that’s...”

“Crazy? Impossible?” He smiled thinly. “I used to think so, too.”

“There’s no such thing as werewolves,” she said, “*or* were-cougars. Whatever sort of weird prank you’re playing, it isn’t funny.”

“It’s not a prank.”

“Please, just stop it,” she said. Her hands curled into fists. “I hate it when people try to mess with my head. I get enough of that from my sister. She’s been doing this to me since I was a kid, telling me stupid stories to try and scare me, laughing when I believe it. It’s not funny. It never was.”

“Maggie,” he said, very gently, “I wouldn’t tell you this unless I was absolutely certain. I followed its trail, and I saw the tracks change from animal to human. I’ll show you, if you like.”

Maggie shook her head, eyes still clouded and dazed. “Just ... just go,” she said quietly. “Go to town, like you promised. I need to go to a hospital. They can explain this. I’m sure there’s a rational explanation.”

“I’m not crazy,” he said firmly.

“You expect me to believe what you’re saying?”

“You have to. After a bite like that, there’s a slim chance that you *haven’t* been infected with lycanthropy.”

She laughed shakily. “Oh, now you’re trying to tell me that *I’m* going to change at the full moon, too?”

“It’s very likely, yes.”

“Oh my God.” Her face had drained of color, making her brown eyes look even darker. “You really believe what you’re saying, don’t you? You really are crazy.”

“How do you think your wound healed so quickly?” he asked. “That’s not

possible with human physiology. That's a lycanthrope trait."

"No. There's got to be some other explanation."

He approached and leaned down, hands resting on the edge of the bed, so his face was close to hers. "Look at my eyes," he said quietly. "Look at them closely. Do these look like human eyes?"

Maggie didn't move, didn't speak. Her lips trembled slightly.

"I know this is a hard to believe," he said, still holding her gaze with his, "but you have to accept it, or you're going to be totally unprepared on the next full moon. You have to be prepared. I don't want you to go through what I did."

"Justin..."

"Watch," he said. "Don't look away or close your eyes." Lightly, he gripped her chin between a thumb and forefinger, anchoring her face in place. Then he reached into himself, into the wild energy that always lurked at the core of his being, like a hot, dancing flame, and let that energy flow through him, just a little: A carefully controlled stream of power. He felt the familiar prickling sensation on his face as fur sprouted on his brow and cheeks. He felt his teeth lengthening until his human mouth didn't seem large enough to contain them, and his lips parted, revealing the sharp, curved fangs. He felt muscles shifting beneath the skin of his face as his nose and mouth stretched into a feline muzzle.

"Oh God," Maggie whispered. Her eyes were filled with stark terror.

Justin released her and stepped back. With control born of years of practice, he forced the energy back down into the core of his being, suppressing it. The fur vanished back into his skin, his fangs retracted into slightly-sharper-than-normal human canines once again, and his muzzle flattened out into a human face. "Do you believe me now?" he asked.

Maggie stared at him, her face sheet white, and for a moment, he wondered if she was going to faint.

He reached out. She pulled away, but he gripped her wrist firmly. "It's all right," he said, his voice low and steady. "I'm not a monster, and neither are you. Lycanthropy is a condition. A disease. That's all. I can control the transformations. The only time I can't is at the full moon, and I can plan for that."

She wrapped her arms around herself. Small tremors shook her body.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't want to show you that. But you have to accept the truth now, or it will be much harder for you in the long run."

"It's real, isn't it?" she said in a small voice. Her arms tightened around herself. "I didn't imagine that. You really changed."

"Yes," he said. "It's real."

She shivered. For a long moment, she was silent, her eyes slightly unfocused. "When you change, are you still yourself?" she asked quietly. Her voice was weak, but steady. "Inside, I mean? Are you still *you*? Or are you really an animal?"

"A little of both," he said. "I retain a sense of who I am, but it's harder to think the way a human does when I'm in cougar form. I react to most things as a cougar would. That's why it's important not to be around people during your change."

"You think you might attack them?"

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe not. I'd rather not find out, so I avoid people during those times. That's why I have this cabin. It's secluded and convenient."

“But there’s a town not far away, isn’t there?”

“Far enough. And when I’m a cat, I tend to avoid people. I go deeper into the woods, not toward the town. Most wild animals, even large predators, will not go near a human if they can avoid it, and they won’t attack unless they’re starving or feel threatened.”

Maggie took a deep breath. “I can’t believe I’m even talking about this,” she said. “How am I going to explain it to my sister, my friends? No one will believe me.”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t tell them anything.”

“Why not?” asked Maggie.

“I think you know the answer to that.”

“But I can’t keep it a secret.”

“You must,” he said.

“It’s my life,” she said sharply. “It’s my choice.”

“If you told anyone, the consequences would be disastrous.”

“But how can I possibly hide something like this?”

“By being cautious and discreet, as our kind have done for thousands of years. Society is not very accepting of this sort of thing, as you might imagine,” he said.

“That’s why lycanthropes work to keep their identity a secret. People’s only perception of us comes from horror movies. If society ever learned about our existence, can you imagine what the reaction would be? We’d be hunted down like animals.”

She bit her lower lip. “Maybe you’re right. I don’t know. Still ... I don’t know if I could keep something like this a secret from *everyone*. I mean, I can see how I wouldn’t want it to become public information, but what about the people I know, the people close to me?”

“I can’t say how they’d react. I don’t know them. But even open-minded people can get strange when it comes to something like this, something that’s outside their perception of what reality should be. I know from experience.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s just say my family and I don’t talk much anymore.” He looked away and tried to ignore the hot stab of pain in his heart.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He shook his head. “It’s in the past. It’s not important now. The point is, I’ve been a lycanthrope for awhile, so I know something about how to live as one. Do you want me to teach you how to handle it?”

She stared at him a moment, then slowly nodded. “All right. Teach me.”

She was handling it remarkably well, he thought. She might seem skittish on the surface, but there was iron strength lurking inside her. He wondered if she was even aware of that. Most people would be in a panic, screaming and raving, or buried deep in denial, insisting that he was crazy even after they’d seen the evidence with their own eyes. She’d simply accepted it after recovering from the initial shock. Had he handled it so well, himself? He couldn’t even remember.

He pulled up a chair and sat down. “The first and most important thing to remember is that you should never be in a populated area when you change. For one thing, obviously you don’t want anyone to see you or figure out what you are. For another, you want to avoid accidentally hurting anyone else. Your mind may not be completely human once you transform.”

“Do you think that’s why that other were-cat attacked me?” she asked. “Maybe he wasn’t even a bad person. Maybe he just couldn’t control himself while he was in that form.”

“It’s possible,” he said slowly. “Still, were-cats do retain some of their humanity when they change. I retained enough to want to help you when I saw you in trouble.”

“So you *were* the other cat. You told me I’d imagined it,” she said, sounding a little offended.

“That was before I knew it was a lycanthrope that had attacked you. I was hoping not to have to mention anything about my own condition, for reasons I’m sure you can understand.”

“I guess I can.” She paused. “I still don’t like the idea of having to hide this from everyone.”

“I don’t like living this way, either. I’d rather not have to worry about keeping it a secret. But believe me, it’s safer this way.”

She stared down at her hands, which rested in her lap, small and pale. Her lips trembled.

He sighed. “I wish I could do more to help you.”

“It’s okay.” She smiled faintly. “I’d probably be dead right now if not for you. Being a were-cougar is still better than being dead. Isn’t it?”

“I’ve always thought so,” he said.

She stared at the wall, blinking rapidly. Reaching out, he lightly touched her face, tilting it toward him, and looked into her eyes. They were wet with tears. “It’s going to be all right,” he said. “We’ll get through this.”

“We? But I hardly know you.”

“Right now, I’m really the only person that can help you, one of the few who knows what you’re going through and can give you some advice. I’m not going to just abandon you.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He was suddenly aware of how close they were sitting, and of her smell, warm and intoxicating and very female. He leaned a little closer, barely aware of what he was doing, and breathed in that smell, his eyes focused on the soft, pale skin of her throat. He could see the pulse there, fluttering just beneath the surface.

Quickly, he pulled back, averting his eyes. He was a man, not an animal. He could control his instincts.

“Justin?” she said. “Is something wrong?”

He looked at her again. Her eyes were wide, her lips slightly parted. Her smell filled his nose, making him giddy. Before he even knew what he was doing, he had leaned down to capture her mouth in a kiss, pressing his lips firmly to hers. His arms surrounded her small body. He felt her stiffen in surprise ... then relax against him. She was trembling slightly.

He wanted to run his hands over her soft body, her firm little breasts and silky thighs. He wanted....

Justin pulled back, shaking his head, as if to shake himself out of the trance.

“Damn it,” he whispered. “I’m sorry, Maggie. I don’t know what came over me.” But of course he did. It had been lust, pure and simple. Or perhaps not so simple-- had his desire ever been so strong, so difficult to control? He’d always prided himself on

being a master of his instincts. How was it that his control had crumbled so easily? “That won’t happen again,” he said firmly.

Maggie was silent, still staring at him with those huge eyes. Her lips were slightly swollen. She touched them lightly with her fingertips. “It’s okay,” she said. Her voice was soft, husky, and low. It surprised him and seemed to surprise her, as well. She blinked, eyes widening a little more, then turned away, taking a deep breath.

“Are you all right?” he asked. His own voice had deepened.

“Yes,” she breathed. Her smell had changed, subtly but unmistakably, grown sharper and hotter. She was aroused.

If he were to slip a hand into her underwear and slide a finger into her tight, young pussy, would he find it slick and wet?

He closed his eyes, trying to collect himself. This was the very last thing he should be thinking about at a time like this, the last thing either one of them should be thinking about.

His breath caught in his throat when he felt her hand on his leg. Slowly, his eyes opened, and he saw her looking up at him, her eyes soft and smoky with desire. His mouth descended slowly toward hers until their lips touched, and he felt the warmth of her breath. The last of his control slipped away. He grabbed her, pulling her body tight against his. He could feel her warm breasts pressing against his chest, her nipples tight and hard. His hands slid over her shoulders, down her back, his palms hungry for the feel of her, wanting to touch and possess every inch. A tiny moan slid from her throat. At that sound, a fresh throb of heat went through his already hard and aching cock.

He pushed her down to the bed and gazed down at her, breathing heavily. He watched her chest rise and fall, watched her stiff nipples poking through the fabric of her shirt. Slowly, he undid the first few buttons, letting it fall open to reveal a wealth of pale, smooth flesh. He stared at her bare breasts a moment, then his gaze moved upward, locking with hers. He saw fear and hunger, excitement and uncertainty, all mingling together in those large, expressive eyes. He lay a hand over the place where her thighs met, and felt the heat of her pussy against his palm, even through the jeans. He pushed his hand against her, and she moaned. “Do you want this?” he whispered hoarsely.

Her lashes fluttered. “I--I don’t know.”

“Yes or no.”

She drew in a breath and closed her eyes. “No.” She swallowed. “I’m not ready for this. Not now.”

He was still for a moment, his hand still resting on that hot flesh between her legs. Then, slowly, he pulled back. It took a great deal of willpower. He closed his eyes and took slow, deep breaths, willing his erection to fade. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have done that.” He opened his eyes and wiped sweat from his brow with one sleeve. “I think I need to go for a walk,” he said, and quickly left the room.

Chapter Three

Maggie lay in bed, her body still aching pleasurably from his touch. She had wanted so much to feel those strong, warm hands kneading her breasts, touching her most intimate place. She pressed her thighs together, a quiver running through her.

She couldn't deny it--just his closeness had overwhelmed her with need.

She rolled onto her side, curling up, trying not to think about the way his catlike eyes had burned into hers.

Was it because of the lycanthropy? Had becoming part cat somehow brought out her animal instincts, made them stronger, more difficult to control? If it was like this now, what would it feel like when she actually changed?

At least she had a month to prepare. But a month had never seemed like such a short time.

* * * *

Justin returned to the cabin about fifteen minutes later, his head a little clearer. He entered the room to see Maggie sitting on the edge of the bed, staring into space. He cleared his throat softly, and she looked up. "Oh ... Justin. Hello."

"Hey," he said, hands in his pockets, eyes averted. "I guess we ought to get going soon."

"Huh?"

"Well, you'll want to contact your sister and your friend," he said, "to let them know you're all right. I can take you to the nearest phone. Since you're not injured anymore, there's no reason you can't come with me."

"Oh," she said. "Oh, right. Thank you." She stood.

"It's a little chilly," he said. "Do you want to borrow a jacket?"

"Sure."

He fetched a heavy wool jacket from the closet and helped her into it. Her smell--warm and female, spiced with a hint of desire--tickled his nostrils, and an image flashed through his mind of her naked body stretched out on the bed, thighs spread, breasts heaving. He shoved the image aside. "We should get going if we want to reach town before nightfall," he said. "It's a long walk."

Maggie nodded and stood. They left the cabin together, walking side by side, but being careful not to allow their bodies to touch. Even so, Justin felt the heat of her body next to his.

* * * *

Maggie expected her feet to start aching after an hour or so of walking, but oddly enough--though the walk was long, and Justin kept up a brisk pace--she didn't tire. She wondered if the extra endurance, too, was a symptom of lycanthropy. The thought gave her a flash of mental vertigo, a sense that her reality was falling apart, turning upside down. She forced herself not to think about it. Right now, that seemed to be the only way she could stop herself from panicking.

By evening, they had reached the edge of West Ridge, the closest town. They stopped outside a small convenience store, where two payphones stood side by side.

Justin waited, hands in his pockets, as she dropped a few coins into the slot and dialed Stacy's cell-phone number. She waited as it rang. There was a click, then Stacy's voice answered. "Hello?"

"Hey, Stace?" she said. "It's Maggie."

"Maggie! Where have you been?"

She blinked, surprised at her sister's tone. She had expected Stacy to sound relieved. Instead, her voice was sharp and disapproving. "I got lost," said Maggie.

"I told you not to lag too far behind. Do you know how long we were looking for you?" She heaved a long-suffering sigh. "All right, where are you? We'll come pick you up."

Maggie's jaw tightened. "So that's it?" she said. "No, 'are you okay' or anything?"

"Well, why wouldn't you be?"

"I was attacked by a cougar," she said.

"What? Is that some sort of joke? There aren't any cougars in this area."

She paused, then sighed. "Yeah, it's a joke."

"So where are you?"

"You know what? Don't bother," she said. "I'll find my own way home."

"What?"

"I don't really feel like seeing either of you right now. Goodbye." She hung up and took a deep breath. She realized she was shaking with anger.

She felt a warm hand on her shoulder. "Maggie? What's wrong?"

"Oh, I just did something stupid," she said. "I'm being childish, I know. I should have just let them pick me up. But I don't feel like depending on Brian or Stacy for anything right now. I'm sick of the way they treat me. They invite me along on these trips, but then they always act as if I'm some annoying little kid, tagging along with them and getting in their way. I don't think I ever grew up in Stacy's eyes. She had to take care of me after we lost Mom and Dad. I was a burden to her then, and I still am. She would have been happier if I never existed." She closed her eyes and rubbed the eyelids with her fingertips. "I'm sorry. You don't want to hear all this."

"It's all right," he said. His hand remained on her shoulder, a gentle, steady pressure.

She took a deep breath, then looked up and forced a smile. "Well, thanks for everything. I guess I can find my own way from here."

He frowned. "How are you going to get home?"

"I don't know. I'll take a bus, I guess."

"It's a long walk to the bus stop. And it's getting late."

"I'll be okay. Don't worry about me. I don't want to be a burden."

"You're not. But I can't help worrying a little. Do you even have any money with you right now?"

Maggie paused. She still had her wallet in her jean-pocket--she hadn't wanted to carry a purse with her on a hiking trip--but she really couldn't remember how much cash she had.

"If you really want to leave town tonight, at least let me walk you to the bus

stop,” he said. “And lend you some cash if you need it.”

“I couldn’t...”

He took her hand in both of his. “I can’t let you just run off.” He smiled, showing just a hint of those white, slightly too sharp teeth. His pale yellow-green eyes reflected the moon.

A shiver traced its way up Maggie’s spine. In the daylight it was easier to ignore his strangeness, but in the fading daylight, his feline qualities seemed to stand out more, a reminder that beneath the surface lurked something feral.

She shouldn’t find that as exciting as she did.

“Your sister knows you’re safe,” he said. “There’s no rush, is there? If you like, you can spend the night.”

Her eyes widened. “With you? In your cabin? I don’t know. It seems ... well, I don’t want to intrude or anything.”

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

“I’ve only just met you.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “But I guess if you’d been planning to tie me up and stash me beneath the floorboards you could have done it by now, right?” She smiled slightly. “I still don’t know what to think of you, but I don’t think you’re a psycho.”

He waited, looking at her. It wasn’t a human look. Those were the steady, watchful eyes of a cat. Yet somehow, she didn’t feel he was a threat ... not to her, anyway. He was still a mystery to her, but there was something between them, a connection. Or maybe she was imagining that. *Could* she trust him?

She found that she wanted to. More than that, she needed to.

“Okay,” she said.

* * * *

It was very late, so they rented a car to drive back to the cabin. The headlights cut twin yellow paths through the darkness.

Maggie was glad they hadn’t walked back, not only because it was such a long way, but because the woods were always so spooky at night, so dark and full of strange sounds. She leaned back in her seat, covering a yawn with one hand.

“Tired?” Justin asked.

“It’s been a long day.” She gazed out the window. It occurred to her that, though it was well-past sunset, she could still see everything outside fairly clearly. Her brow furrowed in confusion. There was no source of light except for the car’s headlights. Even the moon was obscured by clouds. The woods should have been pitch black. But she could see the leaves on the trees, the patterns of the bark, the small, quick shape of a rabbit darting into the shadows, the reflected shine of the headlights on its eyes. She had an absurd, yet powerful urge to leap out of the car and run after it.

She looked away from the eerily clear night forest, staring down at her hands.

“You sure you’re okay?” Justin asked.

“I feel so odd,” she said. “Not bad, really. Just odd. Like I’m seeing and hearing everything in a new way.”

“Do you believe, now?”

“I think I’m starting to. I thought I’d believed before, when I saw your face change, but I don’t know if I *really* believed it, not deep inside. Some part of me was still convinced I’d hallucinated it, or dreamed it, or something.”

“And now?”

“Now ... I don't know. I feel like I'm just waking up, really waking up, for the first time.” She took a deep breath. “God, this is all so crazy.” She brushed a lock of hair from her face. “How many of us are there?” she asked.

“Lycanthropes, you mean?”

She nodded.

“Impossible to say. Not many.”

“But you must know at least a few others.”

He nodded. “I know of at least three other were-cougars who use this forest as their hunting ground--two males, one female. Cougars are territorial, especially the males, so I don't have a lot of direct contact with the others, but I can feel their presence.”

Her brow furrowed. “How?”

“Hard to explain. I just feel them out there, somehow. I usually know when one of them is nearby, even if I can't see or smell him.”

They were silent for the rest of the drive. At last, the car pulled up in front of the cabin, and Justin switched off the headlights and turned the key. The car's engine rumbled softly, then quieted. “Ready?”

She nodded.

They got out of the car and entered the cabin. Justin lit a small kerosene lamp. Maggie wouldn't have thought it would be enough light to see by, but she saw everything as if it were broad daylight. “Let me get a fire started,” said Justin, moving over to the fireplace. “It's a little chilly tonight. You can rest, if you like.”

“If I'm in the bed, where will you sleep?”

“I have a spare cot,” he said. “I'll be fine.”

“If you're sure?”

“I'm sure.”

She walked into the bedroom and stretched out on the soft bed.

She heard Justin moving in the other room, his footsteps, the *thunk* as he dropped another log into the fireplace, followed by the soft, spitting crackle of flames as the fire got going. Then his large, broad-shouldered form appeared in the doorway. He rested a hand on the doorframe. His features were lost in shadow, all but his eyes, which shone in the darkness like polished stones. “Do you want anything?” he asked.

Yes. You. The thought leapt through Maggie's mind before she could stop it, and her cheeks flushed hotly, though she knew she had no reason to be self-conscious. It wasn't like he could hear her thoughts. “Um, no thank you,” she said. “I'm fine.” “All right,” he said. “There's a pump outside, if you get thirsty.”

“A pump?”

He laughed. “Primitive, I know. But the water is fine, I promise. Are you sure there's nothing else you need?”

“I'm fine.”

“Good night, then.” The door creaked softly shut.

Maggie rolled onto her side, facing the wall. Her heartbeat had quickened slightly. She felt a slight disappointment, mixed with relief ... but what had she expected? For him to come in, tear her clothes off, and fuck her like an animal? Just when had her imagination started to resemble an X-rated movie? Anyway, Justin was a

civilized man. He wouldn't take advantage of her like that. It bothered Maggie that a part of her wanted him to.

She closed her eyes and tried to shut off the thoughts. She needed some sleep. She would have to leave the cabin tomorrow, to go back to her apartment, her job. The thought of going back home was surreal. After what had happened to her, she almost didn't feel she belonged in that world anymore.

Would her secret stop her from getting too close to other people, lest they find out? Would she be an outcast? The questions circled around and around in her mind, keeping her awake.

When sleep finally came, it was filled with dreams of a sleek, powerful feline form running through the night, shining yellow-green eyes, the hot, salty taste of blood, and the crunch of bones between long, sharp teeth. She woke with a gasp, trembling ... not with fear, but with the excitement of the hunt, the thrill of running on powerful limbs. A chill ran down her spine, and she looked out the window, at the moon, half-obscurd by thin, gauzy clouds. It stared down at her like a yellow eye.

Chapter Four

She woke the next morning, her mouth dry. She opened her eyes to the sight of a tin cup of water sitting on a chair beside the bed. There was a fresh set of clothes for her, as well, draped over the chair's arm. She drank the water, dressed, and walked out of the bedroom, the floorboards creaking softly beneath her feet.

Justin was crouched in front of the fireplace, already dressed, rolling over a log with a poker. Flames leapt playfully around and above the charred wood. He looked up. "Sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you," she said.

"There's some hash-browns in the kitchen, if you're hungry. It's already cooked."

"I *am* hungry. Will you join me?"

"No thanks. I already ate. I usually prefer a more high-protein breakfast, anyway."

She thought about her dream, about the cougar running through the forest after something small and fast. Could it be? Had Justin hunted in cat-form, and had she somehow shared the experience? It was a strange notion, but nothing seemed beyond the realm of possibility, now.

She headed into the kitchen, served herself a plate of the warm hash-browns and sat down at the small, oak table. The hash tasted fine, and there was plenty of it, but it left her feeling oddly unfulfilled. She found herself longing for a side of bacon or sausages ... or maybe even a steak. A rare steak, nice and bloody. Odd. Maggie had never much cared for red meat.

She stared down at the empty plate a moment, then looked up to see Justin standing in the doorway. "There's some jerky in the cupboard," he said with a small, knowing smile. "But I'm sure you'd rather have something fresher. If you like, I could go hunting again."

Her arms prickled with goose-bumps. "No, that's okay."

He frowned slightly. "What's wrong? You're uneasy."

"How do you read my emotions so easily? Do you have ESP, or something?"

He raised one eyebrow.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Don't look at me like that," she said.

"Like what?"

"Like I'm talking crazy. My view of reality has just been turned inside out. I'm not going to assume anything. I mean, how am I supposed to know what you can or can't do? I've never known a were-cougar, or a 'were' anything, for that matter."

He chuckled. "Okay, okay. But no, to answer your question, I'm not telepathic. I just sense and feel things that other people don't."

"That sounds like ESP to me."

He shrugged. "Depends on your definition. I can't read thoughts, but it's true that I sometimes know things without really understanding *how* I know them. You could call it animal instinct."

“I guess,” said Maggie. Now that she thought about it, it didn’t seem so farfetched. Animals could sense things that people couldn’t. She remembered the old family dog, and how he’d always grown restless when a storm was coming, long before there was any sign of it in the sky. She’d always assumed he was able to smell it in the air somehow, but maybe it was more than that. Maybe animals had some form of ESP. But Justin was no ordinary animal. Perhaps, in him, those natural abilities were just a lot stronger.

“Stop trying so hard to reason it out,” he said, sounding amused. “You’ll just frustrate yourself. I don’t think my condition is something that science can explain.”

“You did it again,” Maggie said.

“Did what?”

“Guessed what I was thinking. Are you sure you aren’t reading my mind?”

“I’m sure,” he said, grinning. “I think I’d know if I’d suddenly developed an ability like that. Since the change, I’ve just gotten very good at reading people’s body language, and their scent.”

“Scent?”

“Yeah. A person’s scent changes based on how she’s feeling. If you’re excited or scared, I can smell adrenaline and sweat. And I hear your heartbeat quicken.”

“And what about when someone is aroused?” The question slipped from her mouth before she could stop it. “Can you smell that?”

He looked steadily into her eyes. “Yes. I can.”

Her heartbeat speeded up a little. Knowing that he could hear that, that he was aware of everything going on in her body, sent a little shiver of mingled excitement and nervousness through her. She pressed her thighs together as wetness tickled her folds. She wanted his hands on her body. Wanted....

No. This was crazy. She felt as if she were on an out-of-control roller-coaster ride, going too fast.

She stood. “Justin....”

Justin walked slowly toward her. Warm fingers touched her cheek, and she felt his breath against her ear. “You’re aroused now,” he whispered, his voice low and hoarse. “Aren’t you?”

She couldn’t move, couldn’t speak. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to regain some sense of control.

Her breath caught in her throat as he tilted her chin upward, and his warm lips touched hers. Her stomach fluttered. He pressed his lips more firmly to hers. The kiss was gentle, but knowing. It made her wonder how that mouth would feel on other parts of her body.

He kissed her neck, very softly, his mouth hovering over her racing pulse. Then he raised his head, and stared deep into her eyes. She couldn’t move, couldn’t speak. His eyes held her in place. Her heart pounded, and she trembled slightly, but she felt suddenly calm and free, as if she were floating in the ocean, surrounded by water but miraculously able to breathe. She wondered if this was what it felt like to be hypnotized. Maybe that was exactly what he was doing.

His finger slid down her cheek, leaving a trail of pleasant, tingling warmth. How had her skin become so sensitive? She gasped softly as his hand slid beneath her shirt, and she felt his warm, calloused palm on her breast. His thumb slowly circled her nipple,

which was already tight and aching. At his touch, it began to tingle with a sweet warmth that spread slowly outward. Her breasts felt warm and full.

“You are so damn sexy,” he whispered, his lips brushing her ear. One hand slid down to cup the small of her back, pulling her against him. She felt the bulge in his pants, pressing against the crotch of her own jeans, against the melting heat between her thighs. He was so hard, so hot. His eyes stared into hers a moment longer, then he pressed his lips against hers once more, harder than before, demanding.

Maggie had heard the expression “my knees turned to water,” but until that moment, she had never really understood how literal it could be. It wasn’t just her knees, however. Her whole body seemed to turn to liquid, and a wave of sweet dizziness washed over her. She might actually have fallen, if he hadn’t been holding her so tightly against him. His lips devoured hers, his tongue plundered the inside of her mouth. He bit her lower lip lightly. When he finally stopped, her lips were tingling and slightly swollen.

He pulled back ... then lifted her into his arms. She let out a startled, breathless laugh, clinging to the front of his shirt. “Justin.”

Without a word, he carried her into the bedroom, as easily as he might have carried a small child. He was silent, his eyes intent and focused on hers. Desire burned in them, hot and bright, as he lay her down on the bed. He stared into her eyes a moment longer. There was a deep and primal hunger in those eyes, an animal intensity. He seemed to be trying to devour her with his eyes alone.

“Justin,” she whispered again, but could form no other words, not even in her mind. All thoughts had fled, leaving her a whirlwind of feeling.

His hands gripped her thighs, pushing them apart. A moment later, his fingers were undoing the buttons of her jeans, deftly, swiftly.

Maggie let out a small moan. Again, she was overwhelmed by that spinning sensation of being on some out-of-control carnival ride.

His hand slid into her jeans. He laid a rough palm against the front of her white, cotton panties. “You’re soaking through,” he whispered. His fingers slipped beneath the waistband. One fingertip found the aching nub of her clit, making her gasp, and began to slowly, deliciously rub back and forth across it. She pushed upward instinctively, a little moan rising from her throat.

“Oh my God,” she breathed. “Oh....”

His calloused fingertip continued to lightly massage her clit, making her dizzy. Liquid warmth seeped from the opening of her sex, trickling slowly down into the cleft between her buttocks. The other hand pushed up her shirt, exposing her breasts. His hot mouth closed over her nipple, sending another hot jolt of desire through her body.

She wanted him so badly right now. She wanted him to take her, to thrust into her, hard and deep, without restraint. She burned with the need.

And yet, a part of her cried out that this wasn’t her. She was being swept away, like a leaf in a river, by feelings she couldn’t understand or control. That feeling was drowned out, however, by the thundering river of lust running through her.

He pulled down her jeans and underwear. The air felt shockingly cool against her exposed pussy.

He trailed a finger slowly along the length of that wet crease, brushing ever so lightly against the throbbing node of her clit, teasing her. He slid the finger into her tight,

wet passage and pushed upward, finding a small, fleshy spot deep inside her, a spot so exquisitely sensitive that she cried out.

When he withdrew his finger, it was wet and glistening with her juices. He licked it, grinning, a shockingly feral grin, complete with sharp, white fangs. Slowly, he stood and began to undo his belt buckle. His jeans slid down his legs. Her eyes focused on the huge erection straining against the front of his boxers, and her eyes widened.

Slowly, she reached out to touch the bulge. She heard Justin's quick intake of breath. His eyes closed as her fingertips caressed the head of his cock through the thin fabric. His breathing quickened. He smiled and, hooking his thumbs beneath the waistband of his boxers, pushed them down, freeing his cock. It was swollen and dark with blood, the veins on the underside standing out in sharp relief.

She started to reach out again, then hesitated.

"It won't bite you," he said. His voice was low and husky, but he was still smiling. "I promise."

"I know," she said, and wrapped her fingers around the thick length of flesh. She felt its heat, felt the blood pulsing inside. It felt dangerous and thrilling. Like a loaded gun. She licked her lips, eyes focused on the hard organ. Carefully, she slid her fingers along its length, stroking him from base to tip. A deep moan rose from his throat.

The sound made Maggie's breathing quicken. She wanted to hear him moan like that again. She closed her fingers more firmly around the base of his shaft and began to stroke it once more, slowly, savoring the feel of it against her palm and fingertips. He moaned again. This time, the sound was deeper, and rippled slightly, like the purr of some huge cat. She looked up. His green-gold eyes seemed to blaze brighter than ever, and tendrils of dark hair clung to his sweat-damp brow and neck.

His large hands encircled her wrists, pushing her arms down, pinning them to the bed. A moment later, his huge body hovered over hers, filling her vision. She felt something large, hot and smooth pressing against the entrance to her pussy. Then something strange happened. In that moment, the boundaries between their two minds seemed to waver on the verge of dissolving. She was aware of both her feelings and his. She felt his desire, the incredible, bonfire strength of it. He wanted to push himself into her, to feel the tightness and heat of her pussy wrapped around his cock.

She wanted it, too. She wanted him buried inside her, filling her. And she knew he could feel her want, as she felt his.

So why did he hesitate?

Justin's eyes lost focus. He took a slow, deep breath, and his large body shuddered slightly. He closed his eyes, and suddenly, she was shut off from his mind. She could no longer feel his desire, and the sudden isolation made her feel cold and alone. He bowed his head, as if there were some terrible battle raging within him.

"Damn it," he whispered hoarsely.

Maggie waited, holding her breath. She could feel him between her thighs. She waited for him to push forward, knowing that if he did, she wouldn't resist.

Instead, he withdrew.

"Justin?" she said, confused.

He stood with his back to her, taking slow, deep breaths. Then he crouched to pick up his jeans and boxers and began to dress.

Maggie sat up. "What is it?" she asked. "Is it something I did?"

“No,” he said. “No. It isn’t you.” He fastened his belt buckle and began to button his shirt, eyes averted. “I’m sorry. I almost made a terrible mistake.”

She blinked. Her pussy was still wet and aching with need, her whole body tingling with arousal. She wanted to grab him and drag him back to the bed. She tried to clear the fog of lust out of her head, tried to figure out just what he was talking about. “I’m on the pill,” she said. “It’s all right.”

“It’s not just that.”

“Then what?”

“It’s ... complicated.”

“That’s not an answer.”

He turned to her. For a moment, he didn’t speak, just gave her one of those long, searching looks. “For one thing,” he said, “it would be wrong to take advantage of you like this. These desires you’re feeling might not be your own.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

He sat down in a chair on the other side of the room, not looking at her. The ancient wood creaked faintly beneath him. “When I first became infected with lycanthropy,” he said, “I changed a lot.” He tapped his fingers against the arm of the chair, his shoulders tense. “Not only were my senses a lot sharper and my emotions a lot stronger, I found my sexual desires were more intense than they’d ever been in my life. They became so difficult to manage that I started avoiding people altogether. I was afraid I might do something I’d regret forever.”

“You mean....”

He looked her in the eye, his jaw tense. “I was afraid I’d lose control and force myself on someone. There were moments when I wanted to. Moments when I felt like an animal in heat. I had to strengthen my self-control a great deal before I felt comfortable going out among people again. Now ... the desires are no less strong, but I’m more accustomed to them. I can manage them.”

“But what does that have to do with this?” asked Maggie. “I want this as much as you.”

“That’s the thing,” he said. “I don’t know if you *really* want this, or if it’s just the heightened desires that all lycanthropes experience. What might be a slight attraction, if you were human, turns into an all-consuming lust.”

If you were human. The words were a shock, like a splash of cold water. She looked away. “I am human,” she said, but her voice lacked conviction.

“No,” he said gently. “I know it’s hard to accept, but neither one of us is completely human. We’re not *less* than human--in some ways, we’re more--but we’re different.”

Her hands curled into fists. “But still, what difference does it make? If the desires are mine, even if they don’t come from my human side, why are they wrong?”

“They aren’t wrong,” he said. “But you aren’t used to dealing with them yet. I can’t take advantage of you like this. If we have sex now, you’ll end up even more confused, and right now you have more than enough to think about.”

She sat up straighter. “How can you claim to know that?” she demanded. “You hardly know me!”

He met her gaze, his own cool and steady. “Because I’ve been there,” he said. “When the beast first awakened in me, I was totally unprepared. I never truly harmed

anyone, thank God, but still ... I did things, crazy things, that shock me even now. I don't want to risk being something that you look back on with shame and regret."

She opened her mouth to protest, but she felt a flicker of doubt. She'd never experienced anything this intense. What if it was true, what he said? What if it was the beast inside her, amplifying her desires, clouding her thoughts? Maggie had never been the sort of person who would sleep with a near-stranger. Sex meant more to her than that ... didn't it?

But damn it, she wanted this so badly.

"What if I told you that I'm willing to take the risk?" she asked.

He paused. "I have other reasons for wanting to hold back," he said. "Personal reasons."

Maggie lowered her eyes. Her hands were clenched, her stomach a knot of disappointment. Still, she was forced to acknowledge that he might have a point. Maybe they were both getting in over their heads. "Is it always going to be like this?" she asked. "I mean, am I going to be this ... excitable all the time?"

"I don't know," he said. "It's different for everyone. But becoming a lycanthrope usually brings out certain things that a person has repressed. Things you would never imagine lurked inside you."

"Like what?" She wrung the sheets in her hand, twisting them. "I'm not going to turn into some sort of psychopathic killer, am I?"

"No, nothing like that." A smile softened his face. "You don't strike me as the type. Just be prepared for the unexpected."

A chill crept up Maggie's spine. She took a deep breath. "I've got to leave soon," she said. Her voice sounded oddly flat to her own ears. "I have work tomorrow, and it's a long way home."

"Of course," he said.

"If you could just drive me to the nearest train station or bus station, I'd be all right from there."

He nodded. Standing, he picked up her jeans and underwear off the floor and handed them to her.

Maggie stood and turned away modestly to dress. Her body was still very aroused, and the feel of cotton and denim sliding over her skin almost made her moan. She felt his gaze on her as she buttoned up her jeans, trying to ignore the ache of need between her thighs.

"What will you do when the next full moon comes?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Then let me help you." He gripped her arm, and she looked up in surprise at the strength of the grip.

"How?" she asked.

"You can come back here. You'll be away from other people, so you won't have to worry about being discovered, and I can help you through the transformation. I can be there to anchor you." He paused. "My first transformation was very hard. I didn't know what to expect, and when it happened, I was in a panic. I don't want it to be like that for you."

She chewed her lower lip. "Okay," she said. "I'll come back."

"Promise?"

“Yes.”

“Okay.” He tore a piece of notebook paper from an old, faded pad on the table and hastily scribbled something on the sheet. “Here’s a number you can reach me at, if you need to.” He pressed it into her hand. “Don’t hesitate to call, for any reason.

Okay?”

Her fingers curled around the bit of paper. “Thank you.”

Chapter Five

The next day, at work, Maggie had trouble focusing. Not surprising, she supposed. The past few days kept replaying in her mind. Even now, a part of her still wondered if any of it was real.

And yet, she couldn't deny that she had changed. The usual office sounds and smells were all strangely amplified. She was aware of rustling paper, clicking keys, the tick of the big, white clock on the wall. She was overwhelmed by the dry, artificial smells of plastic and new paper, the dusty, musty smell of the carpet, the biting smell of fresh paint where a scratch on the wall had been painted over. The odors seemed to crawl deep into her nose and tingle unpleasantly in her sinuses. Her eyes watered, and she sneezed.

"Bless you," said a voice next to her. Raspberry-scented shampoo and the cloying, flowery scent of too much perfume swirled together inside her newly sensitized nose as her manager, Ms. Blick, leaned closer. "You aren't getting sick, are you?"

Maggie forced a slight smile. "No, no, I'm fine."

"Good." Ms. Blick smiled. "Did you enjoy your little vacation, by the way?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes. It was fine." Not counting the part where she'd been attacked by a were-cougar and infected with lycanthropy, of course. But then, if that hadn't happened, she wouldn't have met Justin.

"Well, that's good," said Ms. Blick, and smiled brightly before moving on to the next employee. Every day, she made her rounds at the office, checking on employees, making small talk or just glancing at their screens to make sure they were being productive. She called it "proactive managing." It had always made Maggie edgy. At those times, Ms. Blick reminded her of an enormous hawk, or maybe a vulture, circling the room slowly, surveying everything with her sharp eyes. Maggie knew that was an uncharitable thought to be having, though, and she tried not to think unkind things about people. Her mother had always told her....

Maggie shook her head, as if to shake the thought free. Why was she always censoring her own thoughts, as if other people could see and disapprove? Other people had too much say in her life as it was. She didn't need to let their scolding voices into her mind. She wondered why she'd never thought of it that way before.

The hours crept by, and she kept glancing at the clock. Maggie's job involved a lot of proofreading, looking over technical manuals for spelling and grammar errors. It was dull work under any circumstances, but today, somehow, it seemed almost unbearable. Her muscles twitched. She felt like ... well, like a caged cougar.

I'm too smart to be wasting my time at a job like this, she thought. The thought had occurred to her in the past, but it had always felt arrogant, almost blasphemous, somehow. Now, it simply felt true. She wanted to leap to her feet and shout it to the room. Instead, she held her tongue and forced herself to focus on the glowing monitor in front of her.

The day seemed to last an eternity. By the time she returned to her apartment, she had a headache.

She rubbed her temples, sighing. She needed some hot tea.

Maggie filled a kettle with water and set it on the stove to boil. As she waited, her gaze drifted to the scrap of notebook paper stuck to her refrigerator door with a magnet. On the paper, written in a sharp, bold hand, was the number Justin had left for her.

She could talk to him anytime she wanted. All she had to do was pick up the phone and dial.

Maggie crossed her arms over her chest and took a deep breath, thinking about him, his voice, his hands. Thinking about how it would feel to have the length of his hard body pressed against hers, his hard cock buried inside her.

She wasn't accustomed to having such powerful desires, especially for someone she'd just met. Maggie was twenty-four, but she'd only had a few boyfriends over the years, and only one of them was what she'd call "serious." But he'd left her over a year ago, and losing him had been hard, hard enough that even now, she didn't feel inclined to start dating again anytime soon. She didn't want to risk losing someone else.

Maybe it was just all those repressed hormones catching up with her? Yes. That had to be it.

The teakettle began to whistle. She poured herself a cup, added a few cubes of sugar and a teabag. The sharp, sweet smell of peppermint filled the air. She sat at the kitchen table and sipped her tea, staring into space.

Later that evening, as she was brushing her teeth, she caught a glimpse of her eyes in the bathroom mirror, and froze.

Normally, her eyes were a deep, chocolate brown. Now, they were as bright as copper, with flecks of gold glinting within, and tilted upward slightly at the corners. They were still her eyes, wide and startled, with the same thick, dark lashes, and yet it was as if some other creature were peering out through them: Something primal, something which, until now, had been sleeping deep within her.

* * * *

That night, she dreamed again of running through forests, fresh, damp earth beneath her paws, the smell of fresh, growing things in her nose. Her sleek body cut through the forest like a blade, limbs moving with an easy fluidity that even the greatest athletes couldn't equal. She was a cougar, built for silence, stealth, speed.

She stopped, head raised, ears twitching. Someone was approaching.

The shadows divided like curtains, and another cougar stepped through, eyes a luminous green-gold. He was larger than her, and darker, all sleek, solid muscle beneath his short, reddish-bronze fur. He moved toward her, grace and power in every step. His eyes held hers in an iron grip.

And then suddenly, it was no longer a cat, but a man. Justin. She looked down at her body and saw that she, like he, was human again. Human, and very naked. She looked up to see him standing close to her, so close that she could hear the heavy beating of his heart. His hands gripped her waist tightly, pulling her against him ... then pushed her to the ground, one hand on the small of her back, guiding her to her hands and knees. She felt his teeth on the back of her neck, gathering the small bit of loose skin there and holding it tight, anchoring her head in place as his body descended on hers. He mounted her like a cat, from behind. She felt the thick length of his cock pressing into her wetness. She gasped, feeling a slight twinge of pain as her pussy stretched too wide, too fast, to accommodate his girth ... but somehow, there was pleasure even in that sensation.

He began to move, first slowly, his cock sliding back and forth within her, stimulating her slick, excited flesh, then faster, until he was pumping in and out of her body, his cock seeming to push a little deeper into her with each thrust. Dimly, she was aware of herself moaning, pushing backwards against him. Her head was lowered, her cheek pressed against the ground, her hands curled into tight fists as he fucked her, so hard and deep that the aching pleasure was almost unbearable. She could feel herself nearing orgasm, the sweet, sharp ache building up inside her.

Then the dream dissolved as a shrill beep filled her ears.

Maggie awoke, her eyes snapping open. Her alarm clock continued to beep, the green, digital numbers blinking on and off. She quickly hit the snooze button and groaned softly. She was damp with sweat, her thighs pressed tightly together.

The dream was still vivid and real in her mind. She could still smell the fresh, cool forest air, the earth and trees. She could still feel the heat of Justin's hard flesh buried inside her.

She took a deep breath, trying to clear her head, but it was useless. She needed release.

One hand drifted down to touch her wet, aroused pussy. A light shiver went through her.

She didn't often touch herself. Something--the ghost of her strict religious upbringing, maybe--left the faint bitterness of guilt when she dared to indulge her own desires. But now, there was no hesitation. She had to come, or she'd explode. Maggie slipped a finger inside herself and began to frantically work it in and out, panting softly as she imagined Justin's long, hard cock inside her. Slick walls of flesh clenched momentarily tighter as she climaxed.

She went limp, breathing hard, sweat trickling down her neck and sides.

She barely knew Justin. Yet he invaded her thoughts and dreams. She burned for him in a way that went beyond a mere infatuation. She kept thinking about his eyes, his large, warm hands, the way they had felt on her skin. She kept hearing his voice, that deep voice that seemed to resonate in the hollows of her bones. Somehow, he had gotten inside her, and now he haunted her every moment. What was it about him?

No time to think about it now. She had to get to work.

Maggie showered, dressed, and had a bowl of cereal, but the crunchy flakes seemed unbearably bland. What she really wanted, she thought, was a nice, big, juicy hamburger. She didn't even need the bun, just the meat, still tender and pink in the middle, maybe even a little red ... bleeding onto the plate.

She realized that she was salivating just thinking about it. But she forced herself to finish the cereal, chewing mechanically, before brushing her teeth and leaving the apartment.

* * * *

"You seem different."

Maggie looked up, knife and fork in hand. She'd been cutting a tender piece from the center of her rare steak. "How?"

"I don't know. Just different." Stacy sat across from her in the small restaurant, squinting as she studied Maggie's face. "Are you wearing contact lenses?"

"Yes," said Maggie. It was how she'd been explaining her change in eye-color to everyone. "I've had contact lenses for awhile," she lied. "I just recently decided to go

with some colored ones.”

“Kind of a weird color,” said Stacy.

Maggie shrugged. “I like it.”

Stacy stared down at her plate of noodles and mixed vegetables, poking at a green pepper with her fork. “You seem older,” she said suddenly. “That’s what’s different. You seem a lot older than you did a few weeks ago.”

A few weeks. Had it really been that long since the cougar attack? A chill crept up Maggie’s spine. The next full moon was approaching. She’d promised Justin she would return, that she wouldn’t try to endure it alone. The thought of speaking to him again, seeing him again, made her heartbeat quicken with a giddy mix of excitement and nervousness.

“What happened to you?” asked Stacy.

“I suppose I just grew up a little,” said Maggie. She speared a piece of steak and slid it into her mouth.

“You never used to eat red meat before, either,” said Stacy. “You always said it made you sick, remember?”

“It did,” said Maggie. “I’ve just developed a taste for it. It happens.”

“I guess,” said Stacy.

They ate their meals in silence.

Maggie realized that the hairs on her neck were standing up. She could feel eyes on her back. She looked over her shoulder, and her gaze was drawn to a short, balding, middle-aged man sitting at the bar, hunched over a plate of nachos, chewing noisily. He wore an oversized, tattered brown coat. He wasn’t paying any attention to her. Why did she have the sense that he’d been looking at her a moment ago?

Maggie forced herself to look away. She was imagining things again. That was all. Her senses had become so hypersensitive that she’d become almost *too* aware of her surroundings.

The check arrived, and she split it with Stacy. As she was leaving the restaurant, someone bumped into her.

“Scuse me,” mumbled a voice.

Maggie looked up. It was the middle-aged man. He hurried past her, but for a moment, he looked straight into her eyes, and she saw a strange flash of recognition on his face. Then he quickly lowered his head and hurried out the door.

Maggie rubbed her arms, shivering.

“What’s wrong?” asked Stacy.

“Nothing,” she said.

Chapter Six

The Hunter watched the girl walk down the street.

She was one of them, all right. He had been watching her for the past few days, and had become increasingly certain. It was in every step she took, every movement, the way she seemed to glide, rather than walk. And those eyes. He had gotten a clear look at them, and he was certain they weren't human eyes. The irises were bright and metallic, with flecks that shone like gold in the sun.

She was one of the monsters.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets, following at a distance. Over time, he had become an expert at following people without looking conspicuous. He appeared casual, unhurried, pausing every so often to look around, as if he were enjoying the day. Just a guy going about his business. But he never let her out of his sight.

He licked his lips. He had to be patient, had to wait for his opportunity.

The girl stopped suddenly, head raised, fingers clutching the strap of her small, black purse.

The Hunter immediately turned and pretended to be interested in a display in a store window. In his pockets, his hands curled into tight fists, the palms slick with sweat. When he glanced up, the girl had resumed walking.

He followed.

They came to a quiet neighborhood. The brick apartment buildings looked clean and well-maintained, and were surrounded by tidy, green lawns and trees. He watched as she went into one of the buildings.

He grinned widely. His armpits were damp with sweat, and he was trembling, not with fear, but with excitement.

He knew where she lived, and what time she left for work and came home. Now all he had to do was wait for the proper time.

* * * *

Justin grunted softly as he lifted another box onto the back of the delivery truck. He'd been loading boxes all day, and his muscles burned dully with exertion. It was one of many odd jobs he'd taken in the past few years. Since he'd become a lycanthrope, he'd been moving from place to place, staying inconspicuous, returning to the cabin every month for his change. It was in the best interest of people like him to stay invisible to the eyes of society.

Some lycanthropes--those who could control their transformations, anyway--chose to live in their animal shape, becoming human only occasionally, if ever. Justin understood and respected their choice, but it was a life he could never embrace. There was still too much of his human self he was unwilling to let go of.

He wiped his brow and stared at the sky, thinking suddenly about Maggie, wondering if she was all right. He had the oddest sense that she was in trouble, that she needed him. Probably just his imagination, but his hunches had been right enough in the past that he wasn't inclined to dismiss them. He supposed it was a moot point, though.

He had no way of contacting her.

Justin's senses were suddenly alert and sharp. He sensed someone near. Slowly, he turned.

The lot was mostly empty, save for a few empty beer cans and a dumpster. He saw no one. Sniffing the air, he smelled fur. "I know you're there," he said. "Come out where I can see you."

A lean, tawny coyote stepped out from behind the dumpster. Justin knew immediately that it wasn't an ordinary coyote. Its golden eyes looked directly into his, alert and intelligent.

Beware, it said.

It wasn't telepathy, exactly. Justin didn't hear the words in his head, like a voice on a radio. But nevertheless, lycanthropes had a way of communicating that went beyond words. He seemed to *feel* the message in his stomach, in the marrow of his bones. He saw it in the tension of the coyote's body, the way its ears leaned backwards. The meaning was as clear as if it had been written in the air with neon letters.

Beware of what? Justin asked, in that same wordless way.

The Hunter has returned, replied the coyote. Then he turned and slunk away, melting into the shadows behind the dumpster.

A chill climbed Justin's spine.

The Hunter was a legend among lycanthropes. He was, it was said, a human man who'd hunted down and killed dozens of were-creatures, often torturing them first. He usually targeted new, young lycanthropes, because they were the most vulnerable, but he'd also killed several old and powerful werewolves, and even a were-grizzly. No one understood how he did it. A lone human shouldn't have been a match for a strong lycanthrope, but the rumors were too persistent for Justin to dismiss them. And by all accounts, he was a sadistic maniac with a thirst for blood.

That settled it. Somehow, he had to find Maggie, to warn her, if nothing else.

If the Hunter was in the area, she could very well be his next target.

* * * *

After another long day at work, Maggie was exhausted ... and irritated.

It was after dark by the time she arrived in the parking lot outside her apartment building. She'd been asked to stay later at work. One hour had turned into two, and then three, and afterwards it had occurred to her that there was almost no food in the apartment, so she'd had to run to the grocery store. It was times like this that really made her wish she owned a car, but in the city, the expense simply wasn't worth it.

She muffled a yawn against one hand, carrying her shopping bag in the other as she walked across the parking lot, eager to get to her room, have some dinner, and sink into a hot bath before going to bed.

The back of her neck tingled.

Maggie froze and looked up. She spotted a man walking toward her, holding a clipboard in one hand and a pen in the other. He was in a uniform of some sort, a blue shirt with a nametag and matching slacks. He appeared to be in his early forties, his brown hair thinning, his face round and unremarkable. He looked perfectly ordinary, and yet the back of her neck continued to tingle a warning. Something about him was familiar, though she couldn't place where she'd seen him before. "Excuse me, miss," he said. "Do you live here?"

“Yes,” she said, her shoulders tensing. “Why?”

He smiled, showing too many teeth. “I was wondering if you had time to answer a few questions for me.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

He kept walking toward her. “It’ll only take a moment.” He held the pen out, as if to hand it to her, but then quickly pressed the tip against her arm and pushed the button on top. Maggie gasped as she felt the prick of a needle. The shopping bag slipped from her hand and hit the pavement. A few oranges rolled away. Her vision began to fade, and her muscles suddenly felt like overcooked noodles, unable to support her. She crumpled to the pavement.

The man’s arm slipped around her waist, and he half-carried, half-dragged her toward a white van nearby. He shoved her into the backseat.

Maggie tried to scream, but only a faint whimper escaped her throat. Her head spun. She was being abducted, right here, in front of her own apartment building. Why didn’t anyone see? Why didn’t anyone stop him?

The man threw a tarp over her, then slammed the door. She heard the car starting up. Her heart raced. Surely, someone would call the police. Surely....

She struggled to hold onto consciousness, but as the car began to back up, she felt herself slipping away. Blackness engulfed her.

* * * *

Justin returned to his apartment, a small, sparsely furnished place with bare white walls. He had never bothered to make it his own. He knew he wouldn’t be here very long. His experiences had taught him how dangerous it could be for a creature like him--a creature with no place in society--to get attached to anything or anyone in the human world.

He opened the refrigerator. Inside, pounds of raw hamburger sat, wrapped in white butcher’s paper and stained red with the juices. He didn’t care much for meat that had been processed and ground to a pulp--he liked it a bit fresher--but oftentimes, this was the best he could get. Now, though, he found he wasn’t hungry. Anxiety tightened his stomach.

Throughout the day, ever since the visit from the were-coyote, the tickle in the back of his mind had been growing. Maggie was in danger. He was sure of it.

He closed the refrigerator and paced, thinking.

There was a bond between were-creatures, which allowed them to sense each other’s presence and to communicate without words. He’d told Maggie he didn’t have ESP, but maybe that hadn’t been entirely true. He didn’t think of it that way--in truth, he didn’t know what to call it or how to think of it--but it certainly went beyond animal instinct. It usually only worked over short distances, but maybe, if he concentrated....

He closed his eyes, reaching out with his mind. He thought about Maggie’s eyes, her voice. He thought about the softness and scent of her skin, the way it felt beneath his palms. Every detail he could remember, he added to his mental sense of her, focusing in. At first, there was only blackness. Then a flicker of something, dim and distant. He listened carefully with his internal senses. There. He felt her.

It slipped away.

He clenched his fist in frustration. For a moment, he’d almost had it. But he had been shut out.

He had to keep trying.

A ripple of restless energy ran through him, and his body shuddered. The beast was close to the surface, bubbling with a wild energy, and its intentions were clear. It wanted to find and protect Maggie, even if it meant killing whoever tried to harm her. He ran his tongue over his teeth. They felt long and sharp.

He couldn't stay here. Not when the bloodlust was running so hot and strong through his blood. He needed to get to the forest. Maybe there, his inner senses would be clearer. Better reception. At another time, the thought might have made him smile, but there was nothing humorous about the way he felt now. He wanted to eliminate the threat. He wanted to kill.

* * * *

Maggie woke, groggy and disoriented, her vision fuzzy. Someone had stuffed a gag into her mouth. Ropes chafed her wrists and ankles. She tried to sit up, and sank down again as dizziness washed over her.

Gradually, her vision cleared enough for her to get a look at her surroundings. She was in the backseat of a moving car, and it was dark outside. She groaned softly, the sound muffled by the gag.

The driver looked over his shoulder. It was the same man she'd seen earlier, the one in the gray suit, with the dark, mirrored sunglasses. "Awake, are you?" he asked, and smiled, a cold, unpleasant smile. "Just sit tight. This will all be so much easier on you if you don't resist."

* * * *

Justin stood in the crystalline silence of the night forest, head upraised, eyes closed. His senses--both mental and physical--were much sharper when he was away from civilization.

He felt her presence again, like the dim flicker of a lighthouse through the fog. He focused in on that light, felt the murmur of her thoughts, felt her fear. His instincts had been right. She was in danger. He had to know more. Like a cougar slipping silently through tall grass, he slipped easily and quietly into her mind, careful not to let her feel his presence. If she knew, whoever threatened her might catch on, as well.

Her fear and confusion surrounded him like a blazing wildfire, threatening to suffocate him. He forced his mind away from it, struggling to keep his own thoughts separate from hers, even as their senses merged. He could feel her body as if it were his own, feel the ache of muscles contorted into an unnatural position, the roughness of ropes scraping against tender skin. Looking out through her eyes, he could see the inside of a car. The road was bumpy and uneven, and through the windows he caught glimpses of trees, dark leaves silhouetted against a darker sky. Briefly, he glimpsed the flash of an ancient and battered green sign, but couldn't quite make out what it said. Carefully, he shifted his consciousness within hers, trying to gather more information.

The driver. He needed to see the driver's face. But the man was staring at the road ahead.

Frustration rose within Justin. They could be anywhere, anywhere at all. How could he possibly find her?

He withdrew, just a bit, from her mind. Her emotions were too overwhelming. He couldn't think. Back within his own body, he took a deep breath, clearing his thoughts.

He had seen a sign from the window of the car. What had it said? He concentrated, trying to bring the hazy mental image of the sign into focus. It had started with A. Applebury Road. Yes. That had to be it.

He knew where that was.

Justin hastily undressed, casting aside his clothes, and flowed into cougar shape, fur and claws sprouting, muscles shifting and rearranging into a sleek, streamlined body. He took off at a run. There was no time to waste.

Chapter Six

The car slowed to a stop and the man got out of the driver's seat. He opened the door to the back seat and reached out to Maggie, who pulled away. She felt a strong instinct to snap at his hand, but the gag stopped her. Even so, he must have seen the flare of anger and revulsion in her eyes, for his smile dimmed. "Behave," he said, "or I'll have to give you another shot."

Maggie didn't want to be drugged again. Drugged, she would have no chance of escape. She forced herself to remain still, though her skin crawled as the man reached out to stroke her cheek with short, damp, pudgy fingers. It wasn't just the texture of his skin, however, that made her want to recoil. It was the smell, a sickly, sour smell, like something that had been left out to rot in the sun. He looked so normal, so non-threatening, and yet there was something about him that was unspeakably loathsome. "Such a pretty little monster," he said. "I almost regret having to do this. I could have a lot of fun with you." He gripped her breast suddenly, twisting and squeezing so hard that she let out a muffled cry of pain through the gag.

Her heart thundered. She growled through the gag, twisting in her restraints.

"Oh, yes. We could have a lot of fun, you and I. But there's no time for that. We have other things to do." He licked his lips, grinning widely. The expression twisted his face into something resembling a goblin Halloween mask. The light in his eyes was inhuman, almost demonic. "There are a lot of preparations to be made. Now, be a good girl and be very still." He grabbed her by the hair and shirt-collar and dragged her off the back seat of the car. She hit the ground, and rocks scraped her shoulder.

Maggie looked around. She was in a forest. Where, she had no idea. All forests looked the same to her. But she saw the same trees--oaks and maples, mostly--that populated the forest where she'd met Justin.

Perhaps twenty feet away, at the end of a long, gravel driveway, was a dingy little house that looked as though it had been abandoned decades ago. The windows were dirty and dark, the white paint faded to a dull, washed-out gray. A foul stink emanated from that house, like the smell that clung to the man's body, but stronger. Maggie gagged, bile rising into her throat. She knew with a heavy, cold certainty that the man was taking her into that house, and that something horrible awaited her there.

She wriggled her wrists, trying to work them free of the coarse ropes. The ropes scraped her skin, leaving it raw and tender, but she ignored the pain. She had to get away.

The man crouched, watching her. "You really think you can escape?" He chuckled. "No. I know what you are. I've dealt with your kind before."

Maggie's jaw tightened. She glared at him.

"Oh, my. Such defiant eyes." He licked his lips again. "I look forward to seeing the look in those eyes at the exact moment your spirit snaps. And you will break. Make no mistake about that. They all break." He rubbed his hands together. "Ah, but we're wasting time." He stood. With one hand, he grabbed the rope binding her ankles and

dragged her toward the house. He seemed unusually strong for a man his size. He should have been puffing for breath by the time he reached the door, but he showed no signs of exertion. He was still smiling as he pulled a ring of keys from his pocket and unlocked the door. “Welcome to my humble abode,” he said, and pushed the door open.

Maggie flinched as the stench assaulted her nose. It was like a wave rolling over her. Bile rose in her throat again, hot and sour, and she choked it down. She didn’t want to see what was inside, didn’t want to know what was causing that horrible smell.

But she knew what it was, in some dark and primal place beneath her conscious mind--the stink of death.

The man dragged her through the doorway, onto the peeling, splintered wood floor. Slowly, he pulled the door shut, leaving them both enveloped in a dense, impenetrable gloom. The darkness was broken only by the dim flicker of an oil-lamp in the corner. Maggie was still, holding her breath. Her pounding heartbeat filled her ears as her eyes adjusted.

They were in a room, about the size of an ordinary living room, with dirty walls that had once been white. Iron cages--each big enough to hold a large dog--lined one wall. On a rickety-looking table sat a bowl which looked as though it had been carved out of ivory, or very pale wood. It was covered with strange designs, like runes. Next to it lay a long, gleaming knife.

The walls and floor were spattered with something dull and brown. It took Maggie a moment to recognize it as old blood. On one wall, behind the cages, was a bloody handprint.

A low moan escaped her throat.

The man giggled, a bizarrely high-pitched, childish sound.

A burst of fear gave Maggie sudden strength. She wriggled toward the door, pushing herself along with her knees and shoulders. The man didn’t try to stop her. He simply watched, still giggling, as she rose up onto her knees and shoved her shoulder against the door, trying to force it open. “Go ahead,” he said. “Beat your head bloody against it, if you like. You can’t get through.”

Maggie turned to look at him. Rage burned through her veins, making her head hot, incinerating the fear. This vile little man held her prisoner, laughed at her struggles, for his own sadistic pleasure.

He must have seen something in her eyes that unsettled him, for the smile faded. “Don’t make me give you another shot,” he said.

Maggie felt something sharp in her mouth. It took her a moment to realize her teeth were growing, lengthening into fangs. Her hands flexed and clenched, and she felt thorn-like claws sprouting from the tips of her fingers, pressing into her palms.

The man’s eyes widened. “No,” he said, “no, you’re too young, too new. You shouldn’t know how to change at will.”

Twinges of pain shot through Maggie’s muscles as she felt them growing, stretching, but the pain didn’t bother her. A surge of triumph made her smile through the gag.

The man’s lips pulled back from his teeth in an ape-like grimace of fear. Then his face twisted in rage, transforming him, momentarily, into a demon. “No!” His hand dove into his pocket as he lunged for her. Maggie saw the gleam of a hypodermic needle a moment before she felt the sting in her neck. Her vision went hazy. Her fangs retracted

back into her mouth, becoming human teeth once again, and her claws vanished into her fingertips. She fell, landing in a limp heap on the floor, her consciousness fading in and out.

“Try that again, and I’ll rip your tongue out, you filthy little whore,” the man said, his voice so thick and distorted with fury that it sounded like a dog’s growl. He shoved her into one of the cages and slammed the door. She heard the click of a lock.

The cage was slightly too small for a human. She was curled into a fetal ball, and still she felt the bars pressing against her back, her knees, the crown of her head. She squirmed.

“You can stay there for awhile,” he said. “In the meantime...” He grinned again, his teeth gleaming with spittle. “Perhaps you’d like to see what’s become of your fellow monsters?” He left the room, vanishing through a doorway in the corner. He returned carrying the bloody, decapitated head of a cougar in both hands.

Maggie recoiled.

The cougar’s mouth hung open. It was missing one eye. The other stared blindly. There was something strangely familiar about its face. For a horrible moment, she thought it might be Justin ... but no. The eye wasn’t greenish gold, like his, but a duller yellow. So why did it seem as if she had seen that face before?

She remembered, suddenly, the terror of being pinned beneath a huge pair of paws, the desperation that had pushed her to grab a sharp rock and shove the tip into one blazing yellow eye.

It was the cougar that had attacked her, the one that had infected her with lycanthropy.

A faint moan escaped her throat, and tears filled her eyes. Even if he *had* attacked her, even if he was indirectly responsible for her being in this nightmare, she wouldn’t have wished this on him. She had the horrible feeling that he had not died quickly and cleanly. The eyes were frozen wide open in a horribly human look of terror.

“There’s an old myth,” said the man, stroking the severed head, “that says a were-creature reverts back to its human shape after death. As you can see, that isn’t true. They remain in whatever shape they happened to be in at the moment the life left their bodies.” He set the head on the table, next to the bowl and knife. “I sell the pelts,” he said, “but the heads, I keep for myself.”

Gagged, Maggie could only stare at him in silent horror.

The man walked over to the window, staring up at the sky. “Soon,” he whispered. He turned to her, his face cold. “You want to know why,” he said. “Why am I doing this?” He approached and crouched in front of her, so his face was level with hers. What she saw in the depths of his murky brown eyes terrified her. It was the manic gleam of insanity, but more--a deep, penetrating hatred. “You might not realize it now,” he said, “but I’m doing you a favor. You’re new. Maybe there’s still some humanity left in you. This way, you’ll die before you lose that humanity completely. Maybe your soul will be intact. If I let you live, you’ll become something monstrous. You don’t want to be a monster, do you?”

Maggie made a muffled noise through the gag. She thought maybe, if he could tell she was trying to speak, he would take it off. Maybe she could reason with him. It was a long shot, but it might be her only hope.

Instead, he stood and picked up the knife from the table. “Solid silver,” he said,

running a finger along its length. “There are some truth to the old legends. A lycanthrope can heal wounds very quickly, but wounds inflicted by silver linger and burn like acid.” Grinning, he gripped the blade tightly in his bare hand until blood oozed between his fingers and ran down his wrist.

The smell of blood, hot and salty, filled Maggie’s nose.

He held his palm out to her. “You want my blood, don’t you?” He took a step closer.

Maggie trembled in her restraints. Something surged within her, something primal and wild. She saw herself lunging from the cage, snapping the bars, tearing the man’s throat open to let his hot lifeblood fill her mouth.

“Yes,” he hissed. His hand tightened on the hilt of the knife. “You really *are* a beast. A menace. And I’m going to exterminate you. Tomorrow, when the moon rises.” He slid the blade of the knife through the bars and pressed the edge against her throat. “There’s a little something you might not know,” he said. “It’s a bit of legend I stumbled across by accident a long time ago, but it turned out to be true. The legend says that if you kill a lycanthrope by the light of the moon, with a silver knife, and drink its blood from the cap of a human skull, you can absorb the creature’s life energy. Not only will you gain some of their strength, but you can actually extend your own life. Fascinating, isn’t it? I didn’t believe it at first. But now....” His grin widened, and he leaned forward. “How old would you say I am, hmm? Forty-four, maybe? Forty-five?” He paused. “I’m eighty-seven. I’ve absorbed the life-energy from over fifty monsters over the years. A pity I didn’t start when I was younger, eh? I’d still have all my hair.” He giggled, reached through the bars, and toyed with a lock of Maggie’s hair, twisting it around his fingers ... then yanked, hard. She winced. “You might think my motives are selfish,” he said, “but it’s not all for me. You see, the longer I live, the more monsters I can kill. I seem to be one of the few people left who believes that the monsters exist. I’m the only one who can do it, you see?” There was a strange urgency in his voice, as if he desperately wanted her to believe him. “I’m all that stands between the monsters and the humans.”

Maggie moaned softly. He was truly insane.

And she was at his mercy.

* * * *

A sleek, bronze cougar bounded through the forest. He paused, head upraised, ears and nostrils twitching as he tested the air.

She was close. He felt it.

A burst of anger and desperation leant strength to his muscles as powerful legs propelled him forward. He reached out with his mind again, slipped easily into Maggie’s consciousness. He felt her fear, but unless he focused completely on her, he couldn’t see her surroundings clearly. He saw only dim, hazy shapes. No matter. He no longer had to rely on his knowledge to guide him to her. When they were linked, he felt himself pulled toward her by some invisible force, something guided him. What, he didn’t know. He just kept running, knowing he had to reach her before....

Before what?

Something terrible was about to happen. And he was running out of time.

He was getting closer. A smell hung in the air, so thick and strong he nearly gagged on it. He slowed, crouching low, and crept forward, nostrils twitching. He

recognized that smell all too well. It was a mixture of old, stale blood and fear.

Ahead, a building stood. It was a house, ancient and faded, its paint peeling and cracked.

There. She was in there.

He had to resist the powerful urge to charge forward and try to knock down the door. Hasty actions might get him killed. Worse, they might get Maggie killed. He had to be cautious.

Crouching low, hidden by foliage and shadows, he closed his eyes and reached out once again. She was very close now. The connection snapped instantly into place, clear and strong. He was looking through her eyes, inside her skin. He almost *was* her.

She was in a cage, bound with coarse ropes that scratched and rubbed her skin painfully. And beyond the bars, he saw a man sitting at a rickety wooden table. The man held a silver knife, which he was sharpening with a whetstone. He paused every so often to hold the blade up to the light, turning it this way and that, admiring it. He glanced down at Maggie and smiled.

Justin felt the instinctive urge to growl.

"Few people can really appreciate the work I do," said the man. His voice was oddly casual, as if he were simply making conversation with a stranger on the bus, instead of a bound and gagged prisoner. "It's an art, really. Everything has to be just right. One detail amiss, and the spell could go totally wrong ... and then who knows what could happen? But I've always done it right." He licked the edge of the knife. "I have a gift."

Maggie made a muffled noise through the gag.

"What do you want?" He approached and reached into the cage, untying the back of the gag and letting it slip free.

Maggie bit his hand, hard, her teeth sinking into soft flesh.

The man screamed. He backhanded her, hard, across the face, and Maggie released him, falling backwards. Her vision blurred.

Justin slid backwards, out of her mind. He was quivering with rage, his lips twitching as he struggled not to snarl.

He would kill the bastard.

Forgetting his resolve to be cautious, he ran toward the house's small window, heart burning with the desire to rip the human into bloody strips. He leapt, his front paws cannoning through the glass, shattering it into a thousand glittering fragments.

He landed inside the house, panting.

The man, still cradling his injured hand, looked up in surprise. "Another one?" He backed away, groping for the silver knife on the table. "If you've come to save her, you're too late."

Justin was in no mood to listen. He swung one paw, batting the knife out of the human's hand, and advanced toward him slowly, eyes narrowed to slits, ears pinned back, muzzle wrinkled in a snarl. He crouched, muscles bunching as he prepared to leap.

"Wait!" the man cried.

Justin sprang, knocking the man to the floor. His teeth sunk into the Hunter's throat, and he bit down, hard. The human's body jerked. He let out a low gurgle, then lay still.

Justin backed away, staring at the limp body, watching blood pool beneath the

man's torn throat. The bulging eyes stared blankly into space. When Justin was certain the man was dead, he turned to Maggie's cage. Her wide eyes stared out at him.

He wished he could speak in this form. He wanted to tell her that the danger was gone, that there was nothing to be afraid of. He let out a low, gentle rumble, hoping she would sense his concern. Padding closer, he licked her cheek with his rough tongue. The fear faded from her eyes, and tears of relief welled up in them.

With a swipe of one paw, he broke the puny lock on her cage. It fell to the floor with a clank.

Justin flowed into man-shape. He was naked, but at the moment, that didn't concern him terribly. He crouched, opened the cage door, and pulled Maggie out. She was shaking. He quickly undid her bindings, then pulled her into his arms and held her tight, stroking her hair. "It's all right," he murmured into her ear. "It's all right. You're safe now."

"You're bleeding," Maggie whispered.

He looked down at himself and realized that she was right. When he'd leapt through the window, he'd cut himself in numerous places. His skin was smeared with blood. He hadn't even felt the pain, so intent had he been on his purpose. "It's nothing," he said. "They're just shallow cuts." He cupped her cheek in one palm and lifted her face. "Are you all right? He didn't hurt you, did he?"

She shook her head, sniffing.

"Then let's get out of here."

"But how? You can't run through the woods naked."

"I'll transform. I can move faster that way than I can in human form, anyway."

"What about me?"

"I'll carry you on my back."

Maggie glanced over his shoulder, at the motionless, bloody form of the dead man.

"He won't be hurting anyone again," said Justin.

It occurred to him that he'd killed a human. He'd never killed a sentient being, not even in self-defense. But he would worry about the implications later. Right now, he was just relieved to have that monster dead. It was the Hunter, he had no doubt about that, the man who had killed countless lycanthropes--butchered them in this very house, if the blood on the walls was anything to go by--and he would have killed Maggie, had Justin not arrived in time.

He held her a little tighter.

"Come on," he said softly, "let's go." He stood, helping her to her feet.

Maggie looked at something over his shoulder ... and gasped. "Justin, look out!"

He turned, and his eyes widened.

The Hunter stood, knife clenched in one hand, his throat ragged and bloody, his teeth bared in an animal grin. "You fool," he rasped. "I can't die." The knife descended, a glittering arch.

Justin jerked away, but not quite in time. The tip of the knife raked his side, and he screamed.

The knife was silver. It burned him like fire. Looking down, he saw the skin red and blistered. He staggered and sank to his knees as a wave of dizziness and nausea washed over him. The pain seemed to be eating into his body like a living thing.

“You made me bleed,” rasped the Hunter. “You’re going to pay for that.” He kicked Justin’s wound, and pain washed over him in a red tide. He fell to the floor, shivering, tasting sour bile in his mouth.

The Hunter raised his knife. Justin looked up at him. He knew his life would end in a moment if he couldn’t force himself to move, but the pain was too intense. He was paralyzed. The knife began to descend. At that moment, the silence was broken by the sound of cloth ripping, followed by a loud, animal snarl. The Hunter turned his head.

A small, sleek, tawny cougar leapt at him. Her teeth clamped into his knife-arm, and he screamed as she dragged him away from Justin. The knife clattered to the floor, and the cougar tackled the Hunter. There was a crunch as she bit deeply into his ravaged neck. The Hunter continued to struggle as she ripped away at the flesh of his throat, until at last, he went still ... and his head rolled away, leaving a trail of blood on the floorboards. His eyes and mouth were frozen open in a look of shock.

Still in cougar form, Maggie staggered away and crouched, shivering. Her teeth and muzzle were stained with blood. Her body shrank, fur vanishing into her skin, until a small, pale, naked human woman crouched on the floor in the great cat’s place, her face still bloodstained, her eyes dazed. She wrapped her arms around herself. Then she turned slowly to Justin and reached out, toward his wound. “Are you all right?”

He nodded. “It’ll heal,” he said. “It didn’t hit any organs. Just hurts like hell.” He glanced at the Hunter’s headless body and exhaled a shuddering breath. “You saved my life.”

“You saved mine,” she whispered, and managed a tiny smile, though her eyes were still frightened. “I guess we’re even.”

“Yeah.” Gently, he touched her blood-stained hair. “Let’s go. I need to get to my cabin.”

“Shouldn’t you go to a hospital?”

“They’d ask too many questions,” he said. “I’ve recovered from worse than this. It’ll be all right. I just need to go somewhere safe and quiet. Somewhere I can rest.”

“It’s a long way, though, isn’t it? There’s a car out front....”

Justin shook his head. “Better not. The authorities will come looking for him sooner or later. We don’t want to do anything that might link us to this. Right now, it just looks like he’s been killed by animals.”

“But....” Her gaze drifted down to his wound.

“I can make it,” he said. “I don’t know if I’ll have the strength to carry you, though. For now, can you follow me in cat-form? We’ll be able to make the journey a lot faster that way.”

“I don’t know if I could transform again. I wasn’t even thinking about it. It just happened.”

“Try.” He touched her cheek. “Can you try? Please?”

“Well ... okay.” Maggie took a deep breath and closed her eyes. A tiny furrow appeared in her brow, and she bit her lower lip. At first, he thought she wouldn’t be able to manage, and his heart sunk. Then she let out a gasp and fell to her hands and knees. A spasm wracked her body, and her back arched. She let out a small mewl of pain. Fear froze his heart. Had he been wrong to ask this of her? Would she hurt herself?

He was about to tell her to stop, but then her body relaxed and began to transform smoothly. Her limbs lengthened, her hands thickened into paws, and pale golden fur

sprouted all over her body. When the transformation was complete, she opened her eyes. They were a shade somewhere between copper and gold.

“You did it,” Justin whispered, and smiled.

Maggie’s tail flicked back and forth. Her eyes were bright with excitement.

Justin transformed again--it agitated his wound, but he ignored the flare of pain--and loped out of the house on huge, silent paws. Maggie followed close behind.

The fresh, clean forest air had never smelled so good.

Chapter Seven

They walked for hours. Justin had to stop several times to rest and tongue-bathe the ugly, blistered wound. It still burned, but he wasn't losing blood, at least. He knew he was lucky. If the knife had even grazed one of his vital organs, he might be dead now.

Their journey took them through thick woods, over fields, and occasionally across roads, though they didn't encounter any cars. At long last, they came to his cabin. Relief washed over him at the sight of the familiar wooden walls and shingled roof.

They got in using the spare key that Justin kept hidden under a stone near the front door. Inside, Justin lay on the bed, in human form, as Maggie washed his wound again and bandaged it. She stroked his forehead, brushing strands of sweat-damp hair away from his eyes. "He's really dead, isn't he?" she asked. "That man, I mean. He isn't going to come back ... right?"

"I really doubt it. There's not much in this world that can survive having its head cut off." Justin closed his eyes. "I'm sorry you had to do that, Maggie. I should have been more careful. I should have made sure he was dead."

Maggie's eyes hardened. "I don't regret killing him," she said. "I saw what he did to those poor people. He would have done the same to me and you. I'm glad he's gone. I just wish none of it had happened. I'm going to be seeing that horrible room in my nightmares for the rest of my life."

"So will I," he said. "I don't want to think about what went on in there."

"He said something about..." She swallowed. "About using the blood of lycanthropes to make himself immortal."

"Well, he wasn't immortal. No human is. But I guess he drank enough blood to make himself invulnerable to things that would kill an ordinary person." Justin sighed. "I hope you can forgive me."

"Forgive you? Justin, you saved my life. For the second time." She smiled slightly and touched his cheek with her fingertips. "I owe you so much."

He looked up at her. Even in human form, her eyes were less brown than he remembered, more coppery. "I just wish I could give you your normal life back," he said.

"Normal life is overrated," she said. "I've changed a lot, but in some ways, I think it's for the better. And anyway, if I'd never been attacked by that were-cougar, I never would have met you." She smiled.

They looked at each other quietly for a moment. Then Justin reached up, curling his fingers around the nape of her neck, and gently pulled her head down to kiss her. Her lips were soft and full, warm and yielding. He nibbled her lower lip, caressed it with his tongue.

When they parted, Maggie opened her eyes and reached up to touch her mouth lightly with her fingertips.

"You know," said Justin, "if you wanted to spend the night here again, you're welcome."

“I’d like that,” she whispered.

He smiled, pulled her down to the bed, and kissed her again, more deeply. When their mouths separated, he held her head to his chest, fingers combing through her hair. “If he’d hurt you,” Justin whispered, “I wouldn’t have forgiven myself.” His eyes lost focus. “If I’d arrived even a minute later....”

“Don’t think about it,” she said. “It’s over now. We’re safe. That man will never hurt anyone again.”

“No, he won’t.” Justin’s arms wrapped around her.

They lay together, side by side on the bed, limbs intertwined. It felt right to hold her in his arms, Justin realized. He couldn’t remember the last time something had felt so right.

* * * *

Maggie stayed in Justin’s cabin for the rest of the week. She’d called in to work and told them she was sick, and she didn’t much care whether or not they believed it. After what she and Justin had endured, nothing much seemed to matter except the fact that they were still alive.

They shared a bed, but for the first few nights, they did no more. The horrors were still too fresh in their minds. When nightmares woke Maggie, Justin would gather her into his arms and stroke her hair and back, murmuring soothing words into her ear. In the mornings, they would take turns cooking each other breakfast.

Justin’s wound healed, bit by bit. By Maggie’s third day with him, the angry red flesh had faded to pink. It still looked terribly painful, though. A mere scratch from the tip of a silver knife had done that. The thought of what a deeper cut could do chilled her to the core of her heart.

One night, as they lay together in bed, wrapped up in each other’s arms, Justin said, “You should go back home soon. Your friends will be worried about you.”

Maggie was silent.

“What’s wrong?”

“The truth is, I don’t really have any friends,” she said. “I mean, no one I’m really close to. There are some people from work that I go out to dinner with about once a week, but that’s it.”

“You have your sister.”

“Stacy and I have never been close. And I think since my ... you know, my change, she’s been very uncomfortable around me. She’s been avoiding me. I don’t think she’ll come looking for me.”

“Surely someone will notice you missing.”

“Some days, I’m not really sure,” she said, unable to keep a hint of bitterness from her voice. “Hardly anyone notices me when I’m there. Why would they notice when I’m gone? I’m not even really needed at my job.”

His warm fingertips grazed her cheek. He cupped her face and kissed her mouth softly. “I think you’re mistaken about that,” he said. “I’m sure you’d be missed if you never went back. But if you’d like to stay here longer, I’m not going to complain.”

“I would like to stay,” she said. “I still have so much I need to learn from you, after all.”

“Then you’re welcome here. For as long as you like.”

Maggie snuggled against him, taking comfort in the size and warmth of his body.

She felt his hands moving over her skin, slow and gentle, stroking her back, her shoulders, her legs.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t want to leave,” Justin said, his breath warm against her ear. “I’ve gotten used to having you here.” He wrapped his arms possessively around her, drawing her closer.

“Well, that’s good,” she said, smiling slightly, “because I intend to stick around for quite awhile.” Impulsively, she slipped a hand down to stroke his thigh, and heard his breath catch in his throat. Her fingers slid into his jeans, beneath the waistband of his boxers, to curl around his cock, which was already hard. She felt the throb of his pulse within that column of hot flesh.

Justin rolled over on top of her, pinning her to the bed, and kissed her, hard. Happily, she parted her lips and let his tongue slide into her mouth. Minutes later, their clothes had been tossed to the floor, and he was driving her mad with pleasure, one finger circling her clitoris as she arched upwards, panting, hungry for more. “Are you ready?” he whispered, his voice husky with barely-controlled need.

“Yes,” she breathed, and felt his cock pressing into her, filling her. She moaned softly, pushing upward with her hips, trying to bring him deeper into her body.

She looked up into his eyes, which burned a brilliant golden green, brighter than she’d ever seen them before. They stared deeply into hers. “I love you,” he said quietly.

“I love you too, Justin,” she replied without hesitation. Her throat was suddenly tight with emotion, and tears filled her eyes. It had been so long since she’d been able to say that to someone and mean it with all her heart. “I love you,” she whispered again.

He kissed her lips softly.

Their bodies moved together, a quickening rhythm, until their cries of pleasure filled the silence of the night. Afterwards, they lay together, panting for breath, their limbs wrapped around each other’s bodies. Maggie rested her cheek against his chest, feeling the quick beating of his heart.

“Whatever happens,” he said softly, “whatever the future brings, we’ll face it together.”

A smile touched Maggie’s lips. “Yes,” she whispered. “Together.” For the first time in years, she realized, she truly felt as if she wasn’t alone.

Justin’s hand stroked her hair. “Do you feel it?” he asked.

She looked up. “Feel what?”

“The others. Two of them are out hunting.”

“I don’t feel anything.”

“Close your eyes.”

She obeyed. After a moment, she realized that she *could* feel something, the faint pressure of other minds against her own. She felt their thoughts touch hers, recognizing her as one of their kind, felt the rhythmic movement of their bodies as they made their way silently through the forest. It was unlike anything she’d ever experienced. Her eyes opened and met Justin’s. He smiled at her look of astonishment. “Do you feel it now?”

“I do,” she whispered. “It’s amazing.” She closed her eyes, feeling the heartbeats of her fellow lycanthropes, the predatory excitement in their minds as they stalked their prey. “We’re so isolated out here in the forest,” she said, “and yet, I don’t feel alone. I feel as if I’m connected to everything.”

“I know what you mean. I feel less alone in this cabin than I do in a city full of

people.”

“I think I like being a were-cougar,” she said.

“It gets better.”

“It does?”

His smile widened. “Just wait.”

* * * *

A full moon shone overhead, painting the woods with pearly, silver light.

Two long, sleek shapes padded through the forest, silent as shadows. Two pairs of eyes--one golden-green, one copper--shone in the darkness. The feline predators moved in perfect tandem, as if they were one mind contained in two bodies.

Ahead, a doe stood motionless, head upraised, ears swiveling.

The cats moved in, eyes focused on their prey.

The doe saw them, but too late. She tried to leap away, but they were upon her in an instant, pulling her down with their greater weight, teeth in her neck. The kill was quick and clean. The doe had no time to suffer. She kicked twice and was still, and the two cats feasted beneath the light of the moon.

As they lay together afterwards, side by side, the smaller cat raised her head, ears lifted. She heard something in the forest, coming closer.

Three more cougars appeared out of the darkness, their eyes luminous with reflected light. They approached and began to sniff her from head to tail. She tensed.

Her mate nuzzled her gently and sent soothing waves of warmth into her mind. *Don't be afraid, he said silently. They're just curious. They've seen me before, but you're new to them.*

Slowly, she relaxed and allowed herself to be sniffed and nuzzled by the other cats. Her fear receded, and a low, contented purr rose from her throat. Her mate watched with amusement and affection in his half-lidded green eyes.

Their curiosity sated, the other cougars lay down nearby, closing their eyes. She could feel the warmth of their bodies, hear the beating of their powerful hearts. The low hum of purring filled the air.

* * * *

Morning arrived, announced by birdsong. Dewdrops clung to the leaves and grass, sparkling in the sunlight, and the sky was a pure, cloudless blue.

Maggie rolled over, rubbing her eyes, and yawned, feeling full and drowsy. It occurred to her that she was naked, and that she could feel cool grass beneath her. She sat up quickly, eyes wide.

“Good morning,” said Justin. He lay beside her, just as naked as she, his head propped up on one hand as he smiled lazily at her. His dark hair spilled over his shoulders.

Maggie looked around, disoriented. Her memories of the previous night were foggy and blurred, like something from a dream, but she remembered running through the forest, chasing something with a sense of savage elation. Her stomach felt heavy and tight. She looked at Justin. “We transformed last night,” she said.

“Yes,” he said, smiling. “Congratulations. You've just been through your first full-moon transformation.”

“Did we really eat a deer?” she asked, aghast.

“That’s what cougars do,” said Justin, eyes sparkling. “Don’t worry, it won’t make us sick. Even in human form, our bodies are able to digest raw meat.”

“It’s still weird.”

He laughed. “There’s nothing normal about being a lycanthrope.”

She looked around. “Where are the others? There were other were-cats here last night, weren’t there?”

He nodded. “They’ve gone back to their own homes,” he said. “I’m sure we’ll see them again, though.”

Maggie crossed her arms over her naked breasts, partly out of modesty, partly from cold. Goosebumps rose on her bare skin as a cool breeze sighed through the woods. “Where are we?”

“Don’t worry, we’re close to the cabin. But there’s no one around. You don’t have to worry about being seen.” He sat up and pulled her close. At his touch, her body awoke, skin tingling with sensitivity, and her breath caught in her throat. His lips grazed her neck.

“Oh no,” she said sternly, pushing him away, “not out here in the woods.”

“Why not?” he asked, his voice teasing. “Like I said, there’s no one around.” His hand settled on her thigh, warm and possessive.

“It’s cold out here,” said Maggie, “and we’re both naked. We’re going to catch a chill.”

“I’ll warm you up.” She felt his thumb brush the moist cleft of her pussy.

Maggie surrendered with a soft moan, melting into his touch. She rubbed her cheek lightly against his chest. “You win,” she murmured, and sighed softly. She felt a vibration building in her throat as he stroked her wet folds.

“You’re purring,” he said.

She smiled. “Well, that’s what cats do when they’re happy.”

He pushed her gently to the grass. Leaning close, he whispered into her ear, “Then let’s see how loud I can make you purr.”

* * * *

Later, in the cabin, Maggie stood in front of the fireplace, watching the flames dance. Justin stood behind her, his arms wrapped loosely around her waist.

“We can’t ever go back,” she whispered, “can we?”

“Go back to what?”

“To the normal world. The human world. Even if we live among them, we’re not ever going to be a part of their reality. Not really.”

He paused. “No,” he said. “You’re right. We live in a different world.” He stroked her hair. “I’m sorry. I know it’s difficult to accept...”

“No,” she said. “I accept it. I’ve lost some things, yes ... but I’ve gained so much.” She looked up, into his eyes. “I experience things differently now. I see and hear and smell so much more. The whole world seems so *alive*. I never would have guessed how much I was missing. I feel like my whole being has been transformed. But I don’t feel like I’ve really lost the person I was. It’s more like something inside me was awakened, and now, for the first time, I’m complete.”

Holding her gaze, he whispered, “I feel the same.”

His lips touched hers. She felt the heat of his breath, his tongue, felt his arms pulling her closer, as if their bodies--their minds--were fusing together, transforming

them into a single being, something greater than either one of them. Maggie's heart trembled with joy.

She was alive and whole and strong. She was herself at last.

The End