



TIGER'S EYE

By
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Chapter One

Caitlyn slid her feet into the four-inch red heels and bent forward to buckle the thin straps around her ankles. Already tall, she felt like a Yeti in the damn shoes, but they were an essential tool of her trade. Three-inch heels were the minimum for strippers. Anything shorter and a girl's legs looked like tree trunks and her stomach pooched out when she strutted on stage. It didn't matter how slender she actually was, the heels made the difference.

The shoes she chose had a plastic, one-piece sole and heel. While not as elegant as heels made of wood or leather, the plastic didn't flex as much and resulted in less strain on her back and legs.

She sat up and leaned back in the chair to take stock of her appearance. Sitting before the oval mirror in her costume, she looked like a little girl playing dress-up. Time to slather on the glam. Make-up was as essential as the heels in this profession.

A wry grin crossed her face when she realized she had labeled stripping as a profession. Of course, many of her co-workers did consider this their career, but not Caitlyn. For her, this was a way to pay for graduate school.

A hulking figure appeared in the mirror, his image looming behind hers. "You have any problems last night?"

The grin turned to a full-fledged smile. "No problems, Andre."

He didn't return the smile, but glared at her with an expression known to send hordes of burly men running for cover. He crossed his massive arms over his chest. "I have to leave early again tonight. I want you to promise you'll have Mickey walk you to your car when you leave."

"Save the menacing glower for someone who doesn't know what a sweet guy you are," she told him.

An imposing black man with a shaved head and piercing green eyes, Andre stood six-foot-four and could bench press a Buick. His forearms were bigger around than her thighs, and a wicked scar from a knife wound bisected his left eyebrow. Despite his terrifying appearance, Andre was nothing but a teddy bear.

A big, gay teddy bear. He was perfect for strip club security. He could single-handedly repel a marine assault and never be distracted by the bouncing breasts around him.

"Don't give me that, little girl," he warned. "You tend to slip away without an escort if someone doesn't keep tabs on you."

"I leave after my set to go home and study," Caitlyn pointed out. "You make it sound like I'm dodging a tail to avoid having my cover blown."

With anyone but Andre, she would have winced at her choice of words, but he didn't bat an eye or make an annoyingly inappropriate sexual comment. "Regardless of the reason, you need to have a security guard walk you to your car."

Caitlyn scowled at his doggedness. She knew the guards were concerned about the dancers' safety, but this was a high-end gentlemen's club with a separate parking lot for employees. She didn't relish the idea of waiting for a lull in club activity just so someone could walk her twenty-feet to her car.

"I'll be careful," she promised.

"Someone will walk you to your car," he told her.

"Andre," Mickey called from the doorway. "I've got to get another case of beer from the cellar. We need you out here."

Andre gave Caitlyn another warning look before lumbering out of the dressing area.

"He means well," Roxanne said, pulling up a chair beside Caitlyn. "I just keep reminding myself that."

Caitlyn laughed. Andre tended to smother all the dancers with a misplaced maternal instinct. "He has the maternal instincts of an elephant."

"Amen, sister." Roxanne smiled and fluffed her short, dark hair one last time. "It's off to work, I go," she sang, giving Caitlyn a little wave she shimmied towards the stage.

Caitlyn turned her attention back to her make-up. Doing make-up for the stage was the same as applying it at home. You just applied more of it.

A lot more of it.

She coated her lashes with the wand of mascara and listened to the roar of the crowd. It sounded like a good audience tonight. A good audience meant good money.

Caitlyn greeted several other dancers as they moved around backstage. The relationship between the dancers was one of easy camaraderie. She'd been pleasantly surprised by the connection she'd made with the women of The Tiger's Eye.

Satisfied with her make-up, she turned her attention back to her hair. She pulled the clips from the hot rollers and unrolled her hair. The waves pulled her waist-length, strawberry-blonde tresses up to mid-back. She chose a hairclip from her bag and fastened it in place, leaving long, curling tendrils loose around her face, creating a simple but artful and elegant look.

She glanced at the clock above the stage door. Thanks to her anal retentive nature, she had half an hour to kill before she took the stage. She always gave herself more time than she needed to prepare.

Despite the heels, Caitlyn stood and began to pace. She'd been so restless for the past few months that the sensation felt almost physical. As though she was coming out of her skin, but that wasn't possible. Not for a half-breed like her.

Roxanne breezed off the stage wearing nothing but her g-string and heels, her face flushed with adrenaline. "It's a live crowd," she announced. "Looks like a bachelor party or a bunch of frat guys trying to look like they belong here. Gonna be easy money tonight."

"I like easy money," Caitlyn said, forcing a smile.

The backstage area consisted of a long, narrow space that ran the length of the building. Lockers for the dancers lined one wall, and the door to a private bathroom sat at the far side of the room. Brushing past Caitlyn, Roxanne moved to her locker and pulled out a small amber vial with a black screw-on top.

Caitlyn's smile faded. "You don't need that stuff."

Roxanne rolled her eyes. "You do. You need to lighten up. Cutting loose every once and a while won't kill you."

Caitlyn chose to ignore the jab. "If Stewart catches you with that stuff one more time, he's going to fire you."

The club owner was adamant about keeping police out of his establishment. High class clientele--Stewart's phrase for big spenders--did not frequent places that were raided by the cops. He'd caught Roxanne using once and had made it abundantly clear that the next 'girl' he saw with illegals would be out on the street in a nanosecond.

The arrogant jackass had actually used the word nanosecond.

"I won't get caught," Roxanne said, tucking the vial into her fist and heading toward the bathroom.

Caitlyn shook her head sadly, watching the buxom brunette strut away. Roxanne was so anxious for a hit she didn't even stop to don a robe.

Not that it mattered. Caitlyn had seen more breasts in the three months she'd worked at The Tiger's Eye, than she'd ever wanted to see in her lifetime. Hell, it was to the point she could identify a dancer by her breasts alone.

Sela swept by Caitlyn to take the stage with her nose in the air. Monica made a face at Sela's back and stuck her tongue out, prompting a laugh from Caitlyn.

"I swear, that girl acts like she's the prima ballerina for the Russian Ballet rather than a stripper at a titty bar," Monica said.

Caitlyn snorted an inelegant laugh. "At least she takes pride in her work. And don't let Stewart hear you call The Tiger's Eye a titty bar."

"Tomato, tomahto," Monica replied. "And it's not pride. It's snobbery. She can't stand that you're more popular than she is. She was reigning queen of the stage until you showed up."

Uncomfortable with compliments and Sela's blatant jealousy, Caitlyn changed the subject, asking, "Is that dress new?"

"Mmm-hmmm." Monica spun around causing the skirt to flare outward, revealing a long expanse of leg. "What'd'ya think?"

"I think you're going to make a fortune in that thing," Caitlyn replied.

"You mean, I'm going to make a fortune *out* of this thing," Monica teased.

Monica's good humor always amazed Caitlyn. An anthropology and sociology student, Monica worked the club as part of her thesis research, pretending to be a single mother of three with no education. Only Caitlyn knew the truth, because they attended the same school, a fact that made Monica extremely nervous. She feared Caitlyn would blow her cover and destroy her 'immersion into the subculture'.

"I meant what I said before. If you'll take the GED, I'll help you prepare for it," Caitlyn teased.

"I don't need a GED to dance," Monica insisted, shooting Caitlyn a murderous look. "Besides, not all of us are cut out to be bookworms."

"You can't dance forever," Caitlyn pointed out, just to be annoying.

"I'll think about," Monica said dismissively. "How's school? Are you ever going to finish?"

"No. I'm going to be ninety and still taking classes," Caitlyn lamented.

"You know better than that," Monica told her in a tone that a mother would likely use on recalcitrant children. "A master's in social work isn't easy to get, but I can't think of anyone better suited to the job. Just be sure to watch that big heart of yours. It's a tough world out there and people will look to take advantage of someone as kind as you."

"People look to take advantage of anyone," Caitlyn commented cynically.

Monica laughed. "That is the sad and sordid truth."

Sela strutted off stage and flashed a catty smile at Caitlyn. "I think I just made more money tonight than I made all last week. Try and top that one, Princess," she said without stopping for a reply.

Caitlyn shook her head and commented, "She's too young to be that bitter and hostile. I wonder what happened to her."

Monica moved towards the stage for her set. "Didn't I just warn you about that big heart?"

Stay away from Sela. She wants to eat you alive.”

Caitlyn followed Monica to the stage and stood in the wings to glimpse the crowd. The house was packed. From her vantage point, she could see Andre denying newcomers entrance. That meant the club had reached its maximum allowable patronage under the fire code. It had to gall Stewart to turn away paying customers, but his fear of law enforcement extended to the fire marshal.

Monica began dancing her first song, a slow number. The dancers always performed three song sets. They danced the first number completely clothed, stripped during the second number, and danced the third number in nothing but heels and a g-string.

Guess which dance made them the most money.

Watching Monica move, Caitlyn had to admit the woman had a natural talent for dancing. Under other circumstances, she would be working in a far more respectable location. Caitlyn could easily see the sociology student dancing off-Broadway, or maybe on a cruise ship. Despite Monica's protestations that she enjoyed stripping as part of her immersion, Caitlyn knew otherwise. Anyone watching Monica's eyes would see that. They were blank and distant as she swayed to the beat. Disassociated.

Of course, Caitlyn was the only one in the club who was paying attention to Monica's eyes.

Unlike Monica, Caitlyn loved to dance on stage. She'd been surprised at the rush she'd gotten on her first night. Her enjoyment had shone through, and her reservations about her decision to work at The Tiger's Eye had fled.

There was something savage and primal about erotic dance that called to her blood. Or at least the half of her blood she'd received from her mother.

She loved the pulsating beat of the music, the way she felt it in her bones. She couldn't stay still if she tried. Her hips automatically rolled, and her body undulated to the pounding rhythm. Unlike the other dancers, her movements were never scripted, never rehearsed. Every night she danced differently, letting the music guide her steps and making her performance a celebration of life.

The heat of the lights against her skin reminded her of the warmth of the sun. She could easily imagine what it had been like for her mother's people in centuries past, dancing naked beneath the hot sun in a pagan ritual honoring the gods. For the time she was on stage, she was more than just an outcast half-breed. She was connected to her ancestors. The curse of her tainted blood forgotten.

She loved the sensual slide of her satin costume against her skin and the erotic thrill that ran through her as she slowly revealed her body. Caitlyn reveled in the feminine power she wielded over the men who paid to watch her dance. Knowing they were watching, desperate to touch her made her blood sing and her head light.

Intellectually, she knew the animalistic thrill came from establishing herself as dominant. It simulated raising her standing in the Pride by making the males seek her for a mate.

Not that she had a Pride. But it didn't matter when she danced, the rush was almost overpowering. It was heady and addictive. While she danced, the restlessness that plagued her disappeared.

Monica finished her set with a flourish and received cheers from the crowd. She sauntered offstage with an audacious wink at the audience.

She met Caitlyn's eyes and winked at her. “Go get them, killer.”

Caitlyn waited for Stewart to announce her stage name. All the strippers used a fake

name, but unlike most clubs, The Tiger's Eye eschewed names like Nancy Nockers, Miss Behavior, or even Crystal Skies. Stewart assigned all his dancers the title of Lady and chose classic names for them. He believed the dancers' names were an important tool in maintaining the image of an elite gentleman's club rather than a strip joint.

She stepped closer to the stage, and an unfamiliar chill of apprehension ran down her spine.

Chapter Two

A drunken man in a business suit jostled past him, and Damien sneered at the man's eagerness to get closer to the stage. He couldn't believe humans allowed--even encouraged--women to expose themselves to strangers.

While *Tigre* tended to be casual about nudity, he found this display degrading. His kind revered and protected their females. Female *Tigre* were rare and represented the future of his species. That was the only reason he had set foot in this hellhole.

A member of his Pride had approached him after attending a co-worker's bachelor party. Kord had been as disgusted as Damien felt patronizing the club, but shifters had to blend with the human world in order to survive. An unattached American man not attending a bachelor party would draw attention. Thus, Kord had spent an evening at a club ironically named The Tiger's Eye.

Damien had been sound asleep when his Pride member had pounded on his door at three AM with an incredulous story about an unknown *Tigre* woman stripping. At first Damien thought the man was drunk, but Kord's distress finally convinced him to check out the unlikely story. None of the females of his Pride would ever participate in such a show, and as alpha, another Pride would have notified him if one of its females entered his territory, because Damien would have been honor-bound to see to her protection.

He took another drink of sparkling water and glanced at his watch. The woman who had finished dancing winked at the audience, earning her a few more dollars before she strutted offstage.

"That was Lady Jade," the smooth-voiced man in the cheap suit announced.

The crowd cheered loudly and several men cat-called at the woman's retreating back. Damien gave a disgusted mental headshake.

"Our next performer is Lady Corinne," he continued.

Damien sat up straight, narrowing his gaze on the stage. Corinne was the woman Kord had insisted was *Tigre*.

The cheers got louder. Apparently Lady Corinne was a favorite.

The emcee smiled at the crowd's response. "Sit back and allow Lady Corinne to tempt you as she did Adam back in the Garden of Eden. Once you see her dance, you will know why he bit that apple."

The comment was corny, but the crowd laughed. Men drew closer to the stage. Well, as close as the burly security guards would let them. Fans elbowed each other as they jockeyed for a better position.

"Gentlemen, I give you Lady Corinne." The announcer stepped back into the shadows.

Damien shot to his feet when a vision in red glided gracefully to the center of the stage. Unlike the previous dancers, this woman moved with an innate pride and a confidence that lacked the artifice of the previous performers. Despite her slender build, her presence filled the entire stage.

When the stage light hit her fully, illuminating her beautiful cat-like features, Damien's special senses roared to life. His skin prickled with the instinctual awareness of another *Tigre*.

The usually subtle sense of being near others of his kind felt amplified a hundred times over. There was no question. The woman was *Tigre*.

His nostrils flared, and he curled his hands into fists, fighting back his natural instincts to protect his kind. The need to blend with the humans around him kept Damien from catapulting onto the stage and carrying her off.

Barely.

Then she began to move. Her body twisted with a slow, sensual cadence that seemed strangely refined and elegant for an exotic dancer. She turned, lifting the mass of golden-red hair to reveal the elegant length of her spine displayed by the low back dress clinging to her supple curves. She released her hair, letting it cascade slowly down her back in a suggestive game of peek-a-boo.

Damien's breathing grew harsher as he watched Lady Corinne's sensual movements on stage. The dance called to him on a fundamental level, reaching through the civilized veneer to coax the slumbering cat within him awake. Her lithe, limber form flowed with the music, and Damien's desire to protect her changed to a desire to possess her. His base instincts warred with his mind for control of his body.

In all his thirty-five years, he'd never once reacted to a woman like this. It was more than sexual attraction--though he was as hard as a battering ram--he needed to take her, dominate her, make her his. He wanted to kill the other men in the bar for just daring to look at her.

He couldn't tear his gaze from her form if someone held a gun on him. Childhood stories of his ancestors reared their heads, stories of pagan dances performed by female *Tigre* that instinctively called to her predestined mate, arousing his instincts and summoning the cat within him. His base response to her dance declared that this exquisite feline woman was his.

She gave the audience a coy look over her shoulder when the tempo changed, segueing into the next song. Her posture changed as she adroitly shifted in sync with the new song. The dance became more salacious than sensual as her trim figure swayed to a tribal beat.

Lady Corinne raised one long, slender hand before her face and began to slowly pull the fingers of the glove she wore free. When she finally peeled the elbow-length garment off Damien's mind caught up with his libido. He realized she was actually going to strip before the assembled throng of horny men.

For the first time since he was a kit, he found himself fighting not to shift. Claws sprang from his fingertips and his incisors lengthened. Damien closed his eyes and took several deep, calming breaths. He had mastered his beast years ago. The beast would not master him tonight.

Slowly, the claws retracted and his canines shortened. With his mouth closed and his hands balled into fists, the small change had not been visible to the surrounding humans. Thank the gods for small blessings.

Unable to resist her call, Damien pushed into the crowd and worked his way up to stand by the stage. Pausing before the stage, he caught the first whiff of her scent. She smelled like summer, a mixture of sunshine and warm rain. All female *Tigre* carried that scent, blended with a unique scent that was all their own. His newly found mate smelled of vanilla and brown sugar, and his mouth watered for something other than cookies.

His mind arrested and his body went still as a corpse. Mixed in that incredible smell of hers was the unmistakable tang of human blood.

Though his logical mind insisted that *Tigre* and humans could not mate successfully to produce a child, his instincts--and his nose--were never wrong. The metallic smell of human was as strong as the scent of *Tigre* telling him that his mate was half-human.

Did she even know she was *Tigre*? Did she know *Tigre* existed?

The thoughts staggered him, but it explained so much. She lived openly with humans, choosing a profession that drew attention to her and in no way served the Pride. Had no one taught her about their people? Trained her to use her instincts? Taught her their history and the need to protect their secret at all costs?

Christ! Had she been to a human doctor? Did they have her blood on record?

Damien's stomach clenched in fear and he vowed to protect his mate. They would not take her while he drew breath. Or while any male member of his Pride drew breath.

His mind reeled at the implications, but he couldn't focus on them. Lady Corinne removed the top of her dress, displaying full, ripe breasts that no doctor could have given her. Those breasts swayed seductively as she shimmied her shoulders. Her hands slid up to cup the beautiful globes and tweak her soft mauve nipples.

Fury coursed through his veins, but he managed to get his temper under control. The fact that these men were looking at his mate, at breasts that belonged to him, with lustful thoughts made him crazy.

She ripped the skirt from her body when the song ended, and segued into a slow, enticing number. Long, long legs strutted around the stage, and when she turned, the perfect spheres of her ass were displayed. Her feminine folds remained hidden by a small triangular piece of black cloth. The slow beat allowed her to arrange her body in provocative positions and hold them for several beats, allowing the men to soak up each position with their eyes and burn it into their memory.

Damien braced his legs apart and crossed his arms over his chest. Men bumped into him in their desperation to slide bills into her garter belt, but he made no move to touch her. If his hand came into contact with any part of her body, he would not be able to restrain himself from hauling her off the stage and bustling her away from the prying eyes.

He knew she couldn't see him. The lights of the stage blinded her to the faces of the men clambering to touch her, but that didn't bother Damien. She'd know who he was soon enough, and he'd have all his questions answered. Eventually.

If their mating followed the usual form, up close his pheromones would send her into heat. She wouldn't be able to have a rational conversation until he marked her, and her insides were bathed with her mate's seed. After binding her to him would be soon enough to enlighten her as to what she was--and what he was to her.

He felt no compunction about taking advantage of her ignorance. They were *Tigre* mates whether she knew it or not, and ultimately, her knowledge changed nothing. The path before them must be walked as the gods decreed.

Chapter Three

Caitlyn raced off the stage like the hounds of hell were nipping at her heels. She shrugged into a ratty old terry cloth robe. On television and in the movies, strippers paraded around backstage in soft, silken robes that rode high on the thigh, and were designed to tantalize the viewing audience. In reality, strippers opted for robes that were worn and comfortable, lightweight--it got hot on stage and the backstage area wasn't much better--and machine washable. With heavy make-up, hairstyling products, food, drink, and close quarters backstage, machine washable was an absolute must.

Caitlyn had removed her shoes and was applying cold cream to her face to take off the six inches of make-up when Stewart appeared beside her.

"I need you to do another set," he announced.

Caitlyn's strokes with the washcloth didn't slow. "We've been over this. It's Thursday. I only do one set on Thursday."

Stewart put his hands on his hips and tried to look intimidating. The skinny man in the cheap suit with the wimpy mustache actually appeared quite comical. He reminded her of the villain in old black and white movies that was always tying some hapless buxom blonde to a set of railroad tracks. She'd always found those villains funny. It was hard to be intimidated by someone threatening death-by-train.

"I don't need you to tell me what day it is. I need you to do another set," Stewart ground out. "We have a big crowd out there and they are spending a lot of money. I want to keep them spending and that means keeping my best girls on stage."

Caitlyn rolled her eyes. Of course, her eyes were closed because she was in the process of removing mascara, but the sentiment was the same.

"I have an early class tomorrow," she told him. They went through this every Thursday. "I have to leave."

"Maybe I should fill your job with another dancer," Stewart threatened. "One who'd appreciate all I do for her."

Unimpressed, Caitlyn turned her attention to scrubbing the dye from her lips. "Maybe you should," she agreed, knowing full well he never would. She was the most popular dancer at The Tiger's Eye. Her page on the Web site racked up nearly as many hits as the home page and three times as many hits as any other dancer."

"Don't think I won't remember this," Stewart snarled and stomped away.

Actually it was more of a flounce. It was hard to stomp when you had all the musculature of a ten year-old boy.

With Stewart gone, Caitlyn let the nonchalant look fade from her face. She ran a brush through her hair, pulled it up in a loose ponytail, and dressed with lightening speed. She had to get out of there. She couldn't explain it. She couldn't rationalize it, and she couldn't understand it, but there was a sense of desperation compelling her to run. To get out of the club.

Tonight on stage, something had been different. Though she took off her clothes for money, tonight was the first time she'd felt naked.

Stripped. Exposed. Hunted.

Like prey ensnared in the mesmerizing gaze of a predator.

Caitlyn slammed her locker shut and all but bolted for the back door. She didn't bother trying to find Mickey to escort her to her car. With Stewart being pissy, he'd make up work for Mickey just to inconvenience Caitlyn.

Caitlyn darted out into the night and made a beeline to her car. She stood fumbling for her keys beneath the spill of the streetlight, when a shadow fell across her hands. Her skin tightened, and she looked up into the hooded face of a stranger who leaned against her car.

The man stood as tall as Andre, but was whipcord lean. Though not as imposing as Andre's Incredible Hulk frame, this man's body seemed to hold power coiled in his taut muscles. For all Andre's brawn, Caitlyn knew instinctively that this man was far more dangerous. Deadly, even.

Though his face was shadowed, she could make out handsome features. He had a slender nose, strong jaw, and high-cheekbones that a model would kill for. The darkness prevented her from seeing his eyes, and she wondered what color they were. His black hair flowed to his shoulders with a sleek shine that made her guess he had some Asian ancestry.

The smell of cinnamon and sandalwood assaulted her, and she stood still, drinking in his intoxicating scent. Her body reacted as if its sensitive nerve endings had been touched with electricity. Pleasant chills chased themselves along her skin, and she felt her breasts swell with desire and her nipples harden into little peaks.

The man hadn't moved. He just reclined against her car, watching her with those shrouded eyes, but somehow she knew he wasn't as nonchalant as he appeared. His tight muscles indicated he was waiting to spring into action.

She licked her lips, her breath coming faster. The thrill-seeking part of her wanted him to spring into action, while self-preservation screamed at her to run. But she couldn't. The draw she felt towards this man overpowered her good sense, and she realized she swayed unconsciously towards him.

With effort, she stopped herself from leaning closer to him, but could not seem to pull back. Her heart pounded hard in her throat and echoed loudly in her ears. It seemed they stayed that way for hours, staring into each other's eyes, but logically Caitlyn knew only a few moments had gone by.

"Hello," Caitlyn finally croaked in dried whisper. She almost winced at the inane comment. *Way to be a great conversationalist*, she thought.

He smiled. At least she assumed he smiled. One side of his mouth kicked up, giving a devil-may-care look to an already too handsome rogue.

"Hello," he replied in a voice as thick and rich as brocade.

Caitlyn wanted to wrap herself in the dark fabric of his voice and couldn't hold herself back any further. She leaned closer to him and her pulse began a triple beat when he stood to his full height. He stood several inches taller than her, forcing her to tilt her head back to meet his gaze. His body was lean and sculpted with a classic swimmer's build. Caitlyn wanted to hurl herself against that well-built chest.

A large, male hand came up to clasp her around her neck, and she needed no encouragement to let him draw her close for a kiss. His mouth touched hers with the gentle brush of a dragonfly's wing. She marveled at how soft and smooth his lips felt against hers, even while the hot press of his mouth to hers scorched her lips.

She moaned and let him pull her body flush against his, her breasts pressed against his chest, one of his legs between hers. Caitlyn barely registered the feel of his body against hers, of his sturdy arms holding her to him, before his tongue traced a searing path across her bottom lip.

Her lips parted on a gasp and his tongue swept inside her mouth.

He tasted better than he smelled, like cinnamon and spice. The velvet stroke of his tongue sent her world spinning away. Nothing existed but this man and his incredible mouth. He wove a web of sensual delight with his talented tongue, both teasing and tantalizing with the promise of making all her erotic dreams come true.

The stranger lifted his head and she tried to follow his mouth with hers, unwilling to give up the exotic taste of him.

"Easy, little wildcat," he told her in that voice that did things to her body that her last boyfriend hadn't managed with his hands. "We have plenty of time."

Caitlyn realized she had been grinding herself shamelessly against the masculine thigh he had insinuated between her legs. With great effort, she managed to stop her gyrations, but couldn't pull herself from the warmth of the stranger's embrace. Her breathing came in ragged gasps and she wanted nothing more than to strip him down and have her wicked way with him. The last fragile thread of reason warned that her reaction to him was dangerous, but he shifted the leg between hers and the bright sparks of pleasure clipped the thread.

"Come home with me," he suggested in a tone that was more order than invitation.

Caitlyn could have wept with relief at not being separated from this man. "Yes," she blurted, hearing the desperation in her voice and not caring.

The man swept her up into his arms, startling her. She burrowed against his chest, trying to get closer to him, to keep that exhilarating scent in her nostrils.

He turned towards the customer parking lot, and Caitlyn caught a glimpse of the glow of a cigarette. Sela dropped the butt on the ground and stamped it out before opening the door and shooting Caitlyn a triumphant smile in the spill of backstage light.

Stewart fired any girl he caught sleeping with a customer. He viewed such an action as prostitution, even if no money changed hands. Caitlyn knew that Sela would waste no time telling Stewart about her being carried off by some man to the customer parking lot. Though it meant the end of her job, Caitlyn couldn't bring herself to care about anything other than the body of the man that held her.

She heard the pop of a car door being unlocked with a remote and realized that the man had his keys in the hand of the arm supporting her legs. Without losing his grip on her, he shifted her in his arms and bent to open the car door. He sat her gently in a bucket seat and then buckled the seatbelt around her as though she were someone he cherished. She distantly heard the door close and her inner muscles spasmed in fear of being left in such need.

He slid into the driver's seat and immediately started the engine. Caitlyn grabbed the seat on either side of her thighs with her hands to stop herself from grabbing him. Soft, buttery leather caressed her palms, and she wanted to rub her naked body against the rich material.

"I'm Damien," the man said over the quiet purr of the engine.

"Caitlyn," she replied, forcing her mind to function. The quiet sound of the engine, the soft leather in her hands, and the cockpit like feel of the car told her this was a very expensive vehicle.

"Caitlyn," he rolled the name around his mouth and she shivered in response. "It's a thirty minute drive. If you'd like to take a nap you can."

For a moment, she wondered where they were going, but realized she didn't care. Her curiosity flitted away with the rest of her common sense. She needed to be wherever this man was like a junkie needing a fix. The thought of sleeping in her current state of need was so ludicrous it almost made her smile.

She considered reaching between her legs to ease some of the need that seared her, but the thought of anything but him touching her intimately was strangely repellant.

She turned her head towards him, hoping to distract herself from her aching desires. Her plan backfired. A glance at the chiseled profile beside her caused the muscles between her legs to ripple with longing. She'd never before known sexual desire could be painful.

As though he sensed the desperation welling inside her, Damien placed a hand on her thigh without taking his eyes from the road. He gave her leg a gentle, reassuring squeeze. At his touch, some of the anxiety Caitlyn felt melted away, but the desire intensified. She could feel the heat of his hand through the coarse material of her jeans like a brand.

It seemed hours passed before Damien finally turned the car into a long, winding driveway. Despite the interminable drive, Caitlyn could not remember any part of the trip or anything they passed. She had no idea where this stranger had taken her, but couldn't bring herself to care. All she wanted was to feel his naked body pressed against hers. At this point, she'd trade her soul for a night in the man's bed.

Somewhere in the back of her mind lurked the thought that she'd lost control of her faculties. A woman who hadn't had a decent date in two years didn't fall into a passionate embrace with a stranger and then let him take her home. The thought struggled to rise to the forefront, but the sensory overload the man caused made it impossible.

Chapter Four

He pulled into a multi-car garage, easing their vehicle into its bay. Caitlyn fumbled for her seatbelt before he turned the engine off, but her hands shook with such force the task proved difficult. She finally heard the satisfying click as the belt released. Before she could reach for the door handle, the door swung open.

An extended hand appeared in her line of vision and she raised her eyes to meet Damien's. She took his hand, letting him help her out of the low-sitting car. In the dim light of the garage, she could tell his eyes were a strange shade of brown, almost an amber color.

Her legs wobbled and Damien slid a supporting arm around her waist, helping her navigate the close confines of the garage. "It's okay, my wildcat. It's not much further."

She clung to him tightly, as though he were her only means of salvation. He guided her through a house she barely noticed.

"This isn't like me," Caitlyn finally managed to get out.

"I know," he told her in a voice so full of conviction, it surprised her.

At long last, Damien pushed open a door to reveal a large bedroom. A purely masculine room, it was decorated primarily in rich burgundies and dark browns. The large four poster bed dominated the room. Under normal circumstances, Caitlyn would have been fascinated with the hand-carved detail of the posts and the gold trimmed comforter that adorned the bed, but for now all that held her attention was the sexual need that burned in her blood.

Damien kicked the door closed behind him and before she could blink, Caitlyn found herself again caught in his passionate embrace. She quickly found herself drowning in sensation, and her mind fogged over with blind desire. He groaned into her mouth, and she felt it all the way down to her crotch.

Frantic to touch him, she struggled with the buttons on his shirt, ultimately ripping the shirt open. She registered the popping sound of buttons flying across the room but ignored it in favor of sliding her hands against his hot skin. His chest hair felt crisp against her open palms. Without breaking the kiss, she slid her hands down his torso enjoying the feel of skin pulled snugly over rippling muscles. There was not an ounce of fat on Damien.

She worked the buckle on his belt loose and struggled unsuccessfully with the button beneath it. He pulled his mouth free, and Caitlyn wanted to weep at the loss.

"Easy baby," he crooned softly and pulled her shirt over her head. His large hands went to the waistband of her jeans, and she watched his long fingers slowly peel the jeans from her. With a tug, they fell from her body to pool around her feet.

After kicking off her slides, she stepped from the jeans to stand proudly before him in her matching bra and panty set. Something in her core demanded she exhibit herself without humility, that she display her young, fertile body to him with dignity.

He growled deep in his chest and clutched her to him with a need that matched hers. She thrilled at the rush of pure feminine power his response produced.

"You taste like heaven," she confessed and elicited an inarticulate sound of pleasure from him.

Suddenly, she was airborne. Fortunately, she landed on the soft mattress and pillows

before her mind registered her flight. Lifting her head, she watched him strip out of his trousers.

Holy God, the man went commando.

She licked her dry lips, and her gaze focused on the hard length of his arousal. She lay half-reclined on the bed, savoring the womanly power she had over his body, grateful her job required her to keep an athletic physique. The look in his amber eyes as they caressed her form made her shiver.

Pointing the toes of one foot, she slowly drew her leg up the sheet, bending at the knee. She draped an arm over her knee and gave him a look full of sensual promise.

He crawled onto the foot of the bed with a predatory grace, continuing along the mattress until he rested above her, forcing her back into a prone position. He balanced his weight on his sinewy arms which were placed on either side of her body. Staring into her eyes, he slowly pressed his lower body against hers, and she felt the blood pulsing in his groin.

Her clit gave an echoing throb. Unable to resist, she rubbed her cleft against him, knowing he could feel her wet desire through the thin satin gusset of her panties.

The muscular frame pressed against her shuddered in response. He shifted his weight from his forearms to his elbows and slid his hands beneath her shoulders. Damien traced a deliciously slow path along her shoulder blades and down to the clasp holding her bra closed. With deft fingers, he unhooked the bra and drew it from her body. He rolled slightly off her to lie beside her and fastened his hungry gaze on her straining chest.

Never before had her breasts felt so swollen and sensitive, the pebbled pink nipples forming hard peaks, and the man hadn't even touched them yet. With one hand, he gently caressed the outside of her breast, and she sucked in a breath.

Amber eyes locked with hers and he held her gaze as he rubbed the pad of his thumb in a gentle circle first over one nipple, then the other. Leisurely, he lowered his head and drew an aching peak into his mouth. Her insides quivered and electricity blazed a path from her nipples to between her legs.

His tongue traced the outer rim of her areola before giving the nipple a velvet stroke. Then he began to suckle, alternating between breasts. The pleasure his mouth gave her had black spots blooming before her eyes. While his mouth ministered to her nipples, his hand trailed down her flat abdomen, pausing to tease her navel with a feathered touch.

"Damien," she breathed, arching violently when his hand finally reached between her legs.

He cupped her vulva and stroked her through her soaking panties, one dexterous finger pressing the cloth inside her. His thumb rubbed over her clit with the barest of touches.

"Please," she begged, convinced she'd spontaneously combust if she didn't feel him inside her.

His head lifted from her breasts, and she became aware of her hands threaded in his hair, but she couldn't remember putting them there.

"Do you want this, baby?" he asked, letting a finger dip under the waistband of her skimpy bikini panties.

"Yes," she cried. "Please. Now."

"There's no going back," he cautioned her, but Caitlyn's mind was too lost in the haze of passion to make out the warning in his voice.

"No going back," she agreed. Anything to end this torment.

She heard the rending of fabric, and quickly found herself blessedly naked before his eyes. Amber flames raked down her body to her bare pussy. Hot fingers stroked the outside of

her outer lips.

"No hair," he murmured.

If she could have held a thought, she would have told him that hair peeking out of a g-string was unattractive. Fortunately, she couldn't hold a thought, which was probably a good thing, given the possessive nature the man above her displayed.

He lowered his mouth to hers, and she groaned in response. The provocative taste of cinnamon and spice swamped her.

That hand cupped her again. One long, thick finger slipped inside her while he massaged her clit with the heel of his hand. She bucked violently, her body dancing on the razor's edge of an orgasm. She reached blindly for where it lay, just beyond her reach.

The hand pulled away abruptly, leaving her hanging on the brink of climax. Frustrated, she beat at his shoulders with her fists, nearly in tears.

Damien nuzzled her ear, blowing softly into it before telling her, "Soon baby, but the first time I want to feel you cum around me."

He positioned himself between her legs and she felt the mushroom head of his cock nestle between her lower lips, finding its place. Her head fell back, and she drew her legs up to wrap around his lean waist, giving him better access to her body.

Caitlyn felt her body spread to accommodate not just his length, but his substantial girth. A breath hissed between her teeth at the pleasure/pain of stretching to hold him. He filled her beyond what she'd believed her body could take. At long last, she felt his heavy balls rest against her. To her everlasting gratitude, he held himself still above her, giving her body time to adjust to his invasion.

* * * *

The gods owed Damien a special blessing for the control he demonstrated in taking his mate. The feel of her tight, wet body clenching around him was the closest thing to heaven he'd ever known. He almost came at just the feel of her pussy clutching at the head of his cock, but the need to pleasure his mate gave him a measure of restraint.

When he was balls-deep inside her, he forced himself to remain motionless, until he saw the tight lines of tension on her face relax and felt the barest easing of the muscles surrounding his cock. He cupped her face in his hands and traced the arch of her eyebrows with his thumbs.

"Easy, my wildcat," he told her, before sliding a hand between their joined bodies to massage her clit.

Her nails dug into his back and her hips thrust against his. He pulled back until just the tip of his cock remained inside her, and then plunged back inside her. Growling with pleasure, he buried his face in her neck and used his thrusts to guide her into a matching rhythm. The soft moans she made in the back of her throat drove him wild.

The bed creaked beneath them as his thrusts gained momentum. Colors danced behind his eyes, and his balls drew tighter against his body. Determinedly, he increased the pressure on her clit and listened as her breath became more labored. He thrust so deeply he butted against her cervix and felt her womb begin to spasm.

She bowed against him and let out a low cry. Her inner muscles clenched him in rhythm with her pulsating climax.

Unable to hold back the tide any longer, Damien thrust hard into her and held. His body strained against hers as he pumped his seed into his mate with a roar of primitive satisfaction.

He let his canines lengthen and gently pierced the skin of her neck, simultaneously marking his mate with his teeth and his seed.

For a moment, he rested against her, their bodies slick with sweat, before rolling to his side and taking her with him. He snuggled her into his arms and rubbed his chin against her hair.

She gave a small sigh, and Damien realized she'd fallen into a boneless sleep. Male pride at her response to his performance brought a wide smile to his face.

Inhaling their mingled scents, he let his eyes drift shut and followed her into dreams.

Chapter Five

Damien awoke with a light-heartedness he'd never felt before. A glance at the warm body cuddled against him reassured him that he hadn't imagined the night before. He'd actually found his mate and brought her home.

Of course she had no idea what she was or that she had forever bound herself to him. That could pose a problem, but Damien considered her anticipated anger over the circumstances to be nothing but an unfortunate bump in the road of happiness they would travel together.

Road to happiness? He shook his head. He sounded as maudlin as the friends he'd teased mercilessly when they found their mates. But he finally understood the soaring ecstasy and sense of completion that discovering your mate brought.

He lay beside her, watching her sleep as the first tendrils of dawn touched him through the window. Although he could have lain there watching her all day, she finally stretched against him and opened her eyes.

The dismay that filled her eyes wrenched his heart, and he reminded himself that the mating fever was likely unknown to her. Her wanton reaction to him taboo in human societies.

"Good morning," he said with warmth, and watched amused as she sat up, drawing the sheet tightly around her. After all, she'd stripped before a group of strangers last night.

The thought chased the smile from his face. Once he'd explained the *Tigre* to her, he'd forbid her to return to that place. She'd use her body to arouse only him.

"Good morning," she replied, her voice husky from sleep and her eyes averted from his.

His cock tightened in response and he forced himself to subdue his response. They had to address serious matters before they could share pleasure again.

"We need to talk," he began.

"No, we don't. Really," she rushed out. "This isn't like me. I don't know what came over me. If you could just take me back to my car, we can forget this ever happened."

He studied her embarrassed features quietly. She was young, he'd put her in her mid-twenties at the absolute oldest.

"Where are your parents?" he asked cautiously.

That surprised her and she raised her gaze to his. "I'm a little old to need parental supervision."

Dancing around the subject was getting him nowhere. He always preferred a direct confrontation to avoidance. "Do you know what *Tigre* are?" he asked.

Fear slid behind her eyes, and she shook her head violently in denial.

"I don't know what you are talking about, but I've got to go. Just let me get dressed and I'll call a cab. No need for you to drive me all the way back to my car," she replied in a voice an octave higher than normal.

She'd obviously heard *Tigre* before. The scent of her fear eclipsed her natural scent. Why would mention of her people cause her fear?

"Let me tell you a story," he said, showing no reaction to her intensified panic. "At the dawn of time, man was more than he is today. He had the ability to change forms. To run with animals, to swim with fish, to fly with birds--to experience nature's bounty from the perspective

of different species. As time went on, man formed tribes that centered around a particular animal. One tribe followed the tiger, one tribe the wolf, one tribe the eagle, and so on. One tribe of man followed no animal path and maintained no totem. This tribe believed itself superior to nature. As more time passed, the tribes lost their ability to shift into multiple animal forms, having dedicated so much of their time to one particular animal. The tribe working against nature lost its ability to shift all together."

"I'm a little old for fairy tales," she told him coldly. She'd scooted to the far edge of the bed and struggled to master her fear.

He continued as though she hadn't interrupted. "The descendants of those tribes walk the Earth today. For reasons we don't know, the tribe with no totem became the most prolific. Their descendants are the human race."

"That's nice. I'm sure you're aware the first amendment grants you the right to believe whatever you want."

"I'm descended of the tribe with the tiger totem," he continued. "We are *Tigre* and to this day have the ability to shift into tiger form."

"Great," she drawled. "I spent the night with a nut that thinks he's a werewolf."

"Weretiger," he corrected, noting her denial lacked conviction. His revelation was not news to her. She knew *Tigre* existed, which meant she knew she was *Tigre*. Why deny it?

Her human blood made it unlikely that she could shift. Had she never seen one of her kind do so? Was this fear of the unknown?

"Watch," Damien instructed. He slid from under the sheet and moved to stand at the foot of the bed.

He dropped to all fours and felt the rippling of bones and muscle that accompanied the change. Fur sprout from his skin, and his senses sharpened. Like a sneeze, it surged through his entire body, but was over in a heartbeat.

In feline form, he crossed the room softly on large padded paws. His sense of smell a thousand times stronger, he found her scent intoxicating. A deep purr began in his chest and rumbled through his body of its own accord.

She sat against the headboard, her back pressed flush to it as though trying to force it to absorb her very being.

He leapt onto the bed and padded up next to his immobile mate. He dropped his massive head, careful to keep his lethal fangs and razor sharp teeth hidden from her view.

He butted his head against the hand that rested in her lap and rubbed his body against her legs in an affectionate gesture. He fought a roar of triumph when she let her fingers run through his fur, caressing his forehead.

The touch was tentative and all too brief. Her hand fell back by her side and she stared at him warily.

He'd made his point. Made it impossible for her to deny *Tigre* existed. Now he had to find out why she was hiding who she was.

Reluctantly, he left the bed and shifted into human form. He donned the discarded clothing from the previous night, before his body got ideas she wasn't ready for.

"Okay, you're right. Werewolves exist."

"*Tigre*," he corrected. "But then you already knew that, because you are half *Tigre*. You might as well tell me your name and who was Pride. Your father or mother?"

* * * *

Caitlyn closed her eyes and bit the inside of her cheek. Her worst fears had come to pass.

She'd been discovered. Even though he told her the history of shifters and had changed forms before her, she had held onto a thin--and completely irrational--strand of hope that he didn't know what she was.

Though her fight or flight switch was turned to flight, she forced herself to leave the bed and dress calmly, surreptitiously searched for something she could use as a weapon. Not that she stood much chance against a full blooded *Tigre*--especially a male *Tigre*--but she couldn't stand the idea of going down without a fight. She did have some dignity after all.

To buy herself some time, she decided to answer his questions. She had nothing to lose, because he already knew the truth about her.

"My mother was *Tigre*. But let me spare you the hassle of hunting her. She's already dead." Caitlyn didn't even try to keep the tinny sound of bitterness from her voice.

Damien sat on the bed watching her dress, trying to appear innocuous and unthreatening. Caitlyn knew better. Having witnessed her mother's preternatural strength and agility, she knew Damien could kill her before it registered he'd left the bed.

Her eyes swept the bedroom as she pulled on her socks. Damn it. Did the man have to be so fucking neat and organized? No heavy paperweights or table top statues adorned the room. Leather-bound books lined shelves built into the wall and the bedside tables were bare. The blasted man had wall sconces instead of lamps.

And why couldn't he have a fireplace? Wasn't a heroine supposed to be able to grab a fireplace poker? She'd never before considered the merits of fireplace pokers – heavily weighted, sharp instruments with a long reach. That would be handy about now. But no, her abductor had to keep his bedroom as sterile as an operating room.

A macabre buzz of satisfaction went through her at the idea of the neat-freak having to contend with her blood stains blemishing his pristine domain.

"I'm sorry about your mother," Damien told her with genuine sympathy lacing his words.

The need of a child to defend her mother rushed through Caitlyn, and she burst out violently, "Just so you know, she didn't intentionally break your most sacred law. She was loyal to her Pride until the day she died."

Damien's brows drew together in consternation. "What are you talking about? What sacred law?"

The look of sincere confusion on his face enraged Caitlyn. As a man, Damien didn't face the same consequences or take the same risks, and thus he could not even be bothered to recall a law that had so drastically affected her life.

"The law against fornicating with a human. The law which resulted in her being forced into exile and made her spend the rest of her days hiding from her people. All because she had the audacity to love her child. And for the record, my mother did not willingly sleep with a human. She was raped."

Caitlyn hurled the words at him like missiles, and he reacted like being struck by one. Damien shot to his feet, fury etched his features.

"What?" he roared with such force that Caitlyn took an unconscious step backwards out of self protection. He swore viciously. "Someone *raped* a *Tigre* woman?" he thundered.

"I told you she didn't willingly betray her Pride," Caitlyn told him in a rush. "My mother was an honorable woman."

She watched Damien visibly struggle to regain control of his emotions. Nostrils flaring, he asked through gritted teeth, "How old was your mother when ...," he choked off, unable to put the horrific act into words.

Caitlyn had apparently underestimated the value a pride placed on its female members, even the dishonored ones. "Fifteen," she whispered, reminding herself that she needed to find a weapon. There had to be something she could use, but her feet were strangely nailed to the floor, her gaze caught by the molten fury in the man's eyes.

"I assume that her alpha killed the bastard," he finally ground-out, after taking several deep breaths following Caitlyn's revelation.

She had the strangest sense that he was asking her for comfort, to tell him that justice had been done on her mother's behalf. She regretted that she couldn't provide him that comfort.

"No. My mother was so ashamed that she ran. She left her Pride that very day, and just when she worked up the courage to return home, she learned she carried me. Since your kind considers mixing *Tigre* and human blood an abomination, she chose not to go back."

Damien stared at her as if he was having difficulty processing the information she provided. Caitlyn felt the foundation of her *Tigre* beliefs beginning to tilt.

"She never went home?" he asked. "Never sought support from Pride members?"

Unexpected tears pricked the back of Caitlyn's eyes. Remembering her mother's strength and implacable courage never failed to move her.

"My mother had to choose between her Pride and her child. She knew if she returned to the Pride they might kill her, but they would definitely kill me. Despite my origin, my mother loved me more than herself and her Pride. She chose me."

Damien's brows shot up when she said the word 'kill'. He ran both hands through his midnight hair, tousling it, and giving him an even wilder and more untamed look. He stared down at the floor for a moment then raised a tortured face to her gaze.

"Caitlyn," Damien began, and her traitorous body reacted at the sound of her name on his lips. "No one is going to hurt you. No *Tigre* would ever kill a woman, especially not a *Tigre* woman." His large hand came up and cupped the side of her face with infinite tenderness. "Regardless of what human blood flows in your veins, make no mistake, you are *Tigre*."

Her skin burned where his hand touched her and the desire to feel those hands run along her body hit her so strong her throat went dry. Swallowing convulsively, she tried to take a step back, but found a chair directly behind her. She jerked her head away from his hand. His touch robbed her of her wits, and she desperately needed them about her.

He dropped his hand and the air stirred, carrying even more of his scent to her. The intoxicating scent of spice and sandalwood was so thick and rich that she wanted to wrap herself in it like a cloak.

"I know the rules from my mother," she said and hated hearing the faint whisper in her voice rather than the bite of fury. "*Tigre* women are not to lie with human men, and no child conceived from such an unspeakable union will be suffered to live."

To her surprise, he turned and moved away from her. Suddenly presented with his back, she was irrationally glad she hadn't found a weapon. For some reason, the idea of striking him hard enough to knock him unconscious turned her stomach, but she couldn't puzzle out why. He could kill her with a flick of his wrist and she couldn't even knock him out? What the hell was wrong with her? She wasn't the kind of woman who lost her backbone just because she slept with man, no matter how mind-blowing the sex.

Damien sat down in the chair that appeared to be his favorite and tilted his head back. He looked exhausted and older, as though Caitlyn's revelations had aged him decades.

"Female *Tigre* are rare and essential to the continuation of our species," he said. "We protect them at all costs. Some Prides ...," his voice trailed off and he shoved a hand through his

hair again, before continuing. "In the past, Prides used lies and fear as part of their protection strategy. The young females were told wild tales to scare them away from human men. I've heard that some Prides still use this technique."

Caitlyn wrapped her arms around herself, trying to ward off a cold that she knew had nothing to do with the temperature in the room. "Wild tales?"

"In truth, your mother could have slept with any human man without fear of repercussions. She could even marry one and not been exiled from her Pride."

Caitlyn sat heavily on the chair. The foundation she had felt tilt now buckled and crumbled beneath her. Her mind screamed 'it's a lie', and her stomach sank when she slowly realized that Damien spoke the truth. Her mother had suffered exile, loneliness and great hardship because of a bully's intimidation tactic.

"But she carried a half-human child. She still would have had to choose between me and the Pride."

Damien shook his head. "Pregnancy is part of the scare tactic. Children between *Tigre* and human are impossible. Or were until you."

Caitlyn's mind froze and several moments went by before it engaged again. "There's never been--in all the history of the world--a situation where a human and *Tigre* have been married or had a torrid affair or anything that would have resulted in a child."

"There've been plenty, including marriages," Damien responded. "But none of those unions have ever produced a child. We believed the species were incompatible for breeding purposes."

That raised Caitlyn's hackles. "Breeding purposes? That sounds like something that's been considered--like something you'd say about the lineage of a show dog."

"Show cat," he corrected and the corners of his mouth kicked up. "But that's not what I meant. We fight to survive. Few female children are born compared to male children, and that makes extinction a real threat. As distasteful as you find the word 'breeding', it's a practical matter essential to our survival."

"Well, I think I'm proof that *breeding*," she stressed the word coldly, "with humans doesn't work. I'm not a shifter."

"No, but your children might be."

Her mouth fell open. "*Children*? I've never considered children. The risk to the child would be too great if it were discovered by *Tigre* Prides."

Her blunt honesty obviously offended him. "The *Tigre* would never send assassins after a female or a child. And had you mated with a human, the blood would dilute so that no traces of *Tigre* would remain after a few generations."

Something about that sentence struck Caitlyn as odd, but she struggled with the revelations confronting her. It seemed foolish to accept Damien's word in light of her mother's teaching and warning, but she did. Something fundamental inside her knew he was not lying. It amazed her that just a few spoken words could completely alter her existence past, present, and future.

Chapter Six

Caitlyn let Damien fix her breakfast. She'd accepted that she would miss her statistics class this morning. Under the circumstances, missing a class no longer seemed a question of life or death.

They'd been eating in silence. Damien seemed to understand her need to process the information he provided, and she appreciated that.

She forked another bite of eggs and asked, "What did you mean when you said 'had you mated with a human the blood would dilute'? You don't think I'm going to voluntarily be part of some breeding program, do you?"

His eyebrows and amusement crossed his handsome features. He took a swallow of coffee before answering. "I hadn't considered it a 'breeding program'," he said and laughed.

Caitlyn's hackles rose. "I am not some science experiment."

"No, you most certainly are not," he said, with a rakish gleam in his eye. When she didn't return his smile, his humor fled and in a somber tone, he told her, "We mated last night."

Instantly, Caitlyn felt her face flame. She was an adult for crying out loud. Surely she could discuss sex during a morning after breakfast with a lover and not drown in embarrassment. "I'm aware of that. I was there," she haughtily informed him.

He studied her with serious eyes over the rim of his coffee cup. "What did your mother tell you about *Tigre* relationships?"

"Nothing. She taught me to avoid *Tigre* at all costs." A self-deprecating smile crossed her face. "Not that you could tell that from my recent behavior."

"Did she explain heat and fever to you?"

"No," Caitlyn replied warily. She had a feeling he was about to make another monumental statement, and she idly wondered how many more revelations she could handle before suffering a psychotic break.

"We are biologically different from humans. Your dance last night, the displaying of your young, fertile body, declared your desire for your mate. It called to my cat in a way no other woman has before. I knew you were my mate before you left the stage. The scent of your mate--my scent--sent you into heat."

"What?" she shrieked.

"The gods choose our mates for us. They chose you for me and me for you. *Tigre* mate for life. When you went into heat, you were consumed by the need to copulate with me, to bind yourself to me. The mating fever lasts until your body receives my sperm and the first rite of mating concludes."

"What?" she repeated, staring at him as though he were an alien from outer space. Some biological imperative had compelled her to mate with him?

"It's a natural process," he told her as calmly as if he were discussing the weather. "It ensures the continuation of the species and provides us with our soul mates. I am fortunate to have found you. With so few females, many *Tigre* men spend their lives without a predestined mate."

"Oh my God," she gasped. "You didn't use a condom."

"Of course not. Only my seed inside you could ease the mating fever."

"Did you even consider pregnancy?" she asked in a rising voice. "Or disease?"

"*Tigre* are not susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases, or most other human diseases for that matter," Damien told her calmly, unperturbed by her growing outrage. "As for pregnancy, nothing would make me happier than having my mate carry my child."

"And if I don't want to be pregnant?" she demanded. Her mind couldn't seem to wrap itself around his announcement that they were predestined mates, so she focused on the birth control crisis.

"Then from now on we will take precautions until you are ready to carry my child," he replied.

Her mind raced. He was way too calm about her denying him a child. "Does this 'heat' force ovulation?"

"Not that I'm aware of. It merely ensures the mating bond."

"And if I don't want to bond with you?"

His brows drew together in obvious anger at her question. "It doesn't matter. We are bonded. Prolonged separation from one another will cause distress and then pain."

"I don't think I'll suffer a moment of distress once I'm away from you," she spat childishly. Glaring at him she rose from the chair and flung her napkin onto the table. "Where's the phone? I need to call a cab. I have work to do."

His jaw worked and she realized he fought to control his temper. For some idiotic reason she wasn't frightened. She knew in her bones this man would never hurt her.

"I will return you to your car, but I will not allow you to work in that place any longer," he said.

Irate, she clamped her hands on her hips. "Allow? *Allow*? You won't *allow* me to work at The Tiger's Eye. News flash, Bub. This ain't the Dark Ages. I don't take orders from you or anyone."

A single, black brow winged upward. "You are overwrought. It's understandable given the situation."

She felt the vein in her forehead begin to throb. "Just take me to my car," she hissed.

Damien stared moodily at the woman in the passenger's seat. He had not handled the issue of her job well, but she had to understand such behavior was unacceptable for a *Tigre* woman.

They were approaching the club, and she hadn't said a word to him since leaving the house. Finally, he spoke. "I noticed a university parking decal on your car."

She continued to stare straight ahead. "I'm working on my master's degree in social work. Dancing just pays the bills."

"*Paid* the bills," he growled before he could stop himself.

"You are not my keeper," she snapped.

"No, but I am your mate. Your safety and welfare are my responsibility," he explained reasonably. "In fact, I am more than capable of supporting you. You needn't work at all, but may finish your degree if you'd like."

To his surprise, his generous offer made her angrier. "Have you contemplated the idea that I don't want a mate? That I'm half human and don't consider this 'mating' thing binding? That I *want* to be a social worker?"

Her words propelled a violent denial through him, and he ground his teeth in frustration.

"I'm trying to take care of you."

"I don't need you to take care of me. I've been taking care of myself for a long time," she told him quietly and reached for the door handle before he pulled into the parking space beside her car.

She opened the door and he stopped her flight with a hand on her arm. "Have dinner with me tonight."

"I can't. I need some time."

"I understand." He didn't like it, but he understood.

"Thank you."

Damien pressed a kiss on her cheek and one of his cards into her soft palm. "Call me when you're ready."

Caitlyn didn't respond. Instead, she opened the door and stepped into the bright sunlight of the morning.

He leaned forward when she turned to close the door. "I'll be waiting for you, my wildcat."

She hesitated then closed the door. He watched her start her car and pull out of the parking lot.

Drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, he left the lot in the opposite direction, before making the block and following her at a discrete distance. The need to see her safely to her destination pulsed in his blood. If he were honest with himself, he also wanted to see where she lived.

She parked in front of a neatly kept apartment complex in a middle-class section of town. He watched her climb the stairs and noted which apartment she entered before reluctantly turning the car around.

He hadn't handled his new mate well and needed advice. Like any self-respecting, independent man, he drove straight to his mother's house.

* * * *

"Look who's doing the walk of shame," Jan teased.

Caitlyn glared at her annoyingly cheerful roommate. She was not in the mood for teasing. "Good morning," she ground out, hoping she didn't sound like she was strangling on a spike.

The humor fled from Jan's face. So much for masking her discomfort.

"Stewart called," her roommate said apologetically.

Caitlyn winced, knowing what was coming.

"He said you were fired and to come by and clean out your locker today."

"Thanks," she replied and headed down the hall towards her room.

Jan was hot on her heels, concern etched on her face. "Do you need to talk?"

Caitlyn paused in the doorway of her room. *Actually Jan, I'm a physical impossibility produced by the mating of two different species, and last night I had the most amazing sex of my life with a shape shifter who claims to be my permanent mate through some metaphysical bonding shit.* "No, but thanks anyway."

"I'm leaving for the field today. I won't be back for a week," Jan warned.

Caitlyn smiled. Jan worked as a geo-archaeologist, which paid about as well as McDonalds, only with worse hours, working conditions, and benefits. For some bizarre reason, Jan seemed to enjoy her job. "I can survive a week on my own. Have fun and try not to stumble onto an Indian burial ground and bring back a curse."

A bright smile lit Jan's face. Her good cheer restored at the thought of digging around

dead people. "I'll try."

Caitlyn closed the door and moved into the bathroom, desperate for a hot shower.

Three days later, as she lay huddled on the couch wrapped in a blanket, her flippant words to Jan haunted her. She felt as though fire-hot pins pressed against the inside of her skin. Colors around her appeared washed out and a low ringing sounded in her ears. Her body seemed to have turned against her, even breathing was difficult. It cried out for something, and she feared she knew what it needed.

She rocked back and forth, desperate to ease the suffering. A loud knock startled her and she whimpered. Just the thought of rising and crossing the room to peer through the peephole exhausted her. Caitlyn glanced towards the door. It was unlocked.

"Come in," she called weakly.

She rested her head against the arm of the sofa and watched the handle turn. Damien's broad frame filled the doorway, and she nearly wept with relief. He crossed the room with a confident stride and knelt beside her shivering body.

"This is unacceptable," he announced, hauling her into his arms. "I cannot believe you would rather suffer like this than call your mate to you."

At his touch, the fiery pokers beneath her skin vanished. She inhaled his heady scent, and her breathing relaxed. The blanket fell to the floor and Caitlyn closed her eyes, resting her head against his strong shoulder. His hands sketched a soothing pattern along her back.

Her agony abated and her body eased, allowing her to melt against him. Time stood still as she enjoyed Damien's gentle ministrations. His touch did more than sooth her physical distress. It felt as though he were seeping through her skin and into her very soul.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed when she finally lifted her head to meet his beautiful amber gaze. It could have been minutes or hours.

"Feeling better?" he asked mildly.

She nodded, strangely discomfited by his concern.

"This is what happens when you are separated from your mate," he told her.

"You don't appear to have suffered," she pointed out, raising a hand to brush a strawberry lock off her shoulder.

"I knew what to expect, and there are preventative measures that can be used when separation is necessary. It's only a short-term fix," he warned.

His rich voice enveloped her and, with the pain gone, her muscles tensed pleurably in reaction. She forced her attention to his words. "So there's no cure?"

He rose from the floor beside her and huffed an offended breath. "We sealed our mating. You did not contract some *disease*."

Great. She was not in the mood to appease male vanity. "I'm a self-reliant person. The idea of being so completely dependent on someone else is repellant. It's nothing personal."

"You find me repellant," he snapped. "Why would I take that personally?"

"I don't find you repellant," she said slowly, as though talking to a child. "Losing my freedom is repellant. Having my choices curtailed upsets me."

His face smoothed out, and he stroked her cheek with the back of his fingertips. "I want you to be happy. I can't be happy if you aren't content."

Caitlyn began to pace the small living room. "I can't be content letting someone take care of me. I need my own life, my own purpose. My existence is more than just being a baby factory. I don't even know if I want children."

That was a bald-faced lie. She wanted children. It was all she'd thought about since

learning her child would have no fear of *Tigre* retribution, but she had a point to drive home.

"I'm not sure how to explain this. It's something we grow up knowing. For a *Tigre* to be so unaware of things that are second nature to us" Damien shoved an agitated hand through his blue-black hair, dislodging the thong that held it in a queue at the nape of his neck. "Most *Tigre* women understand their mate's need to protect and cherish her. They are aware of their importance to our species and the threat of discovery that looms over our heads."

Caitlyn chafed her hands up and down her arms. She had spent so much of her life afraid of *Tigre* that she hadn't paid much attention to the human threat. "I'm just as much human as *Tigre*," she reasoned.

"Do you really think that matters? There are groups of humans that have hunted us through time. They would love to get you into their hands and underneath their microscopes."

She couldn't control the fear that crept across her face.

Damien stopped her in mid pace with a crushing embrace. "I won't let anyone harm you."

She heard the conviction in his voice and her fear receded. "It doesn't change the fact that I want to control my destiny."

Caitlyn almost winced again. Could that have sounded any more melodramatic?

From the shaking in Damien's chest, he found her statement amusing, but the humor didn't reach his voice when he replied, "I think I can understand that."

The unexpected words had hope blooming in her chest. "You can?"

Damien pulled back to look her in the eye. "I wouldn't want to surrender my life and dreams just to produce the next generation of *Tigre*. I would, but I wouldn't want to."

"What are you saying?" she asked, expectation ringing in her voice.

One hand reached out with long, tapered fingers and tucked her hair behind her ear. "I'm saying that I won't stand in the way of your dreams. If you want to be a social worker, I'll stand beside you."

She heard the promise in his words encompassed more than just the words he said. A weight lifted from her shoulders, and she felt positively euphoric. "You will?"

"It won't be easy," he warned. "We'll both have to make adjustments."

Caitlyn considered his words. That was true in any relationship, and she'd died a thousand deaths the few days they'd been apart. The thought of him walking away from her now ... she couldn't even consider it. "If you're serious"

"I'm serious," he reassured her.

"Please don't joke about this," she whispered.

"I'm not," he sounded insulted, but she had to be sure.

"If you can adjust, I'm sure I can," Caitlyn promised.

A radiant smile lit her mate's face a moment before his mouth swooped down to capture hers in a passionate kiss that carried the promise of a joyous future.

The End