

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

CAIT MILLER

BELIEVE
IN THE
Magic

BELIEVE IN THE MAGIC

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BELIEVE IN THE MAGIC

Cait Miller

Prologue

Two years ago

Like the cover of a romance novel, the young couple lay intertwined with each other on a heart-shaped bed, modesty safeguarded only by the closeness of their bodies and the tangle of the red satin sheet. The gold of their hair and of the rings on their fingers glinted in the light from the candles that flickered over them. Clothes lay scattered around the room, and a table by the window held the remains of two meals. On the nightstand, an open bottle of champagne rested in a bucket of swiftly melting ice next to two empty champagne flutes.

They did not stir when the door opened, slept on soundly even when he entered the room. He regarded the scene with grief, anger and satisfaction. The drug had worked.

For a moment he felt regret for what he was about to do but he smothered it mercilessly as he raised the gun in his gloved hand. The woman—no, creature—before him was no longer the little girl for whom he had had such hopes and dreams. His daughter was dead, the male she was wrapped around had seen to that. She was like *him* now and they would both have to be put down. He knew there were others. They could only be the work of evil. No human could do what they did. And so it was up to him to free their souls from torment.

In the end the decision was easy.

Chapter One

Today

The insistent buzzing of the dreaded alarm sliced through Megan's brain, signaling her that it was time to start another day. Groaning softly she stuck an arm out from beneath the covers and slapped at the button on top of the clock until there was blessed silence. "Oh God...it can *not* possibly be time to get up yet." It was warm and cozy under the quilt and she had had an unsettling night full of dreams she couldn't recall. They had left her feeling unrested and groggy. Sticking her nose out from beneath the covers, Megan checked the digital alarm clock and saw that it was indeed six a.m. She flung back the quilt, swung her bare legs over the edge of the mattress and stood up, pulling the faded oversized T-shirt down over her backside as she rose and stumbled blindly to the bathroom and into the shower.

Forty-five minutes later, Megan pulled her ancient car into the parking lot at the side of the beachfront Seaview Hotel, a two-story monument to Scottish tourism complete with the distinctive blue and white flag of Scotland on the roof. Painted the color of sand, the narrow building had thirty rooms stretching to the back. The restaurant with its large glass conservatory was at the front, and the main door leading to the reception area at the side.

It was early September and the sun was already on its way up, though a wispy mist still hung over the sand and only a few ambitious—or stupid—people were visible jogging or following jubilant dogs.

Megan swallowed the last mouthful of coffee from a travel mug before clumping it onto the dashboard. She could have made the drive to work in her sleep, which was probably just as well considering she almost did. "I am definitely not a morning person...which of course explains why I choose to work the breakfast shift," she

grumbled sarcastically to the tired blue eyes that looked back at her from the rearview mirror.

She climbed out of the car and headed for the staff locker room to stow her bag, pulling her damp curly dark hair into a ponytail, and checking her white blouse and short black skirt and tights as she went. Actually the seven-until-four shift wasn't so bad despite the uncivilized time she had to get out of bed. It meant the rest of the day was hers to do what she pleased. Anyway, she had been tired for so long now she was almost used to it, it was her own fault for going to bed late nearly every night. Briefly she thanked the god of all waitresses that she was on holiday for two weeks after today.

Danny, the brusque Irish chef, had already started cooking when she passed through the hot kitchen with all its gleaming stainless steel appliances—someone must already be down for breakfast. Short and nearly bald under his crumpled hat, Danny had been there as long as she could remember. Faded blue amateur tattoos climbed up his arms beneath his rolled-up sleeves. Megan turned a blind eye to his teapot filled with dark beer sitting on the counter behind him, as most of the staff did. Danny was an alcoholic, but he did his job and was loved by customers and staff alike. They had stopped trying to change him long ago.

"How is it going, Dan? Are we busy?"

"What time d'ya call this?" he growled without turning away from the bacon sizzling under the grill. He was notorious for being at least an hour early for work and it was his standard reply. Megan grinned and walked on. If she was half an hour early he would still say the same thing. He loved her really.

As she approached the dark wooden doors to the dining room she became aware of a building sense of trepidation. Frowning, she pushed open the door and froze. Sitting alone directly in front, watching as if he had expected her, was the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen. He looked to be in his early thirties, just about the right age for a twenty-six-year-old waitress, she thought whimsically. Although he was seated she knew he must be tall, but then, at five-foot-three everyone seemed tall to her.

In seconds her gaze ran over his short black hair and the sharp planes of his clean-shaven face to his broad shoulders and a fantastic chest covered by an indecently tight T-shirt. Through the shirt, a shadow of dark hair was just visible. She suffered a small pang of disappointment that the table blocked her view of what promised to be a lower half as heart-stopping as the rest of him. When she brought her eyes back up to meet his silver gaze, her head felt as if it were buzzing and the rest of the room faded away from them.

The spell was broken when his mouth curved in an insolent smile as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. She felt the heat rising in her face and turned away to pick up an order pad.

Ah, but I do, Megan.

Megan's eyes snapped back to his face as the deep American voice floated through her head, but his eyes were on the newspaper on his table and his face impassive. *You have got to get more sleep, Meg*, she thought, shaking her head.

You had trouble sleeping last night? Me, too. Maybe we should try together.

She narrowed her eyes and looked at him again but he seemed to be paying her no attention. *Get a grip, Megan. Telepathy is impossible, it's just lack of sleep...or too much television and far too many vampire romance novels... You will go over there and take his order and he will not have an American accent.*

There was only one other table occupied in the dining room. She decided to play it safe and headed over to the elderly couple to take their order, ignoring the word *coward* following in her wake.

Jack Douglass raised his eyes from his newspaper and watched her talk cheerfully to the people at the other side of the brightly decorated restaurant. Her Scottish accent was surprisingly easy to follow when he had been struggling to understand people since he arrived. They were discussing local tourist attractions, but her thoughts were chaotic as she tried to rationalize what had just taken place. The only other Scot he had

ever been able to understand with ease was a good friend whose mother was American. She had influenced her son's speech enough to slow him down and it appeared that someone had done the same for this woman.

He closed his eyes, inhaling deeply. His sharpened senses were tuned to Megan now and he easily picked out her unique scent from the multitude of others in the dining room. No perfume, just soap and her own skin. Now that he was in her presence magical energy zipped between them, an almost tangible force. It made his skin tingle and the hair on his arms stand up, like a storm was coming and the air was filled with electricity.

Jack allowed himself a small satisfied smile. He knew he shouldn't toy with her but she was broadcasting her thoughts so loudly that he had been able to pick up more than he had anticipated. More than he had with the other women he had found, and he hadn't been able to resist teasing her. Nearly two years spent searching worldwide medical databases for records of women with the mark that declared their compatibility as a mate. More than a dozen wasted journeys where he had been tempted again and again to just give up and accept the inevitable.

It had all been worth it. He had finally found Megan Cartwright—in Scotland of all places! Although given that this was where his kind originated, he should probably have expected it. It hadn't taken long for him to make a few inquiries and find out everything he could about her.

When he'd first seen her picture she had taken his breath away—she was beautiful. He still couldn't believe his luck. He had known that she was the one the moment he was in her presence, linked with her mind, smelled her scent. The constant shiver of energy over his body as his magic reached out for her only confirmed it. It was a feeling he had begun to doubt would ever come.

The urge to mate had become more difficult to ignore. He had searched for so long now that sleeping and eating, never mind working, were becoming impossible. Perhaps the cruelest part of the mating cycle was that any time he had tried to gain relief by

seducing a woman, he would find himself utterly repulsed and unable to even force himself to touch her. No matter how attractive he found her, it was apparent that only one of the marked would do. Several times now, he had been faced with women who could have given him that relief. Resisting the temptation had been harder than he had expected, but to give in to it would have meant giving up his hopes and dreams for the future.

It felt like his own body was betraying him. Now he was hungry and horny and temptation was once again standing ten feet in front of him pretending she couldn't feel him. This time though, he could take what he wanted. An erection pressed painfully against his jeans as he thought about claiming Megan at last. He couldn't wait to see the birthmark on the inside of her thigh—see it...touch it...taste it...

He waited patiently for her to approach his table. He had to physically touch her to begin the process that would bind them together. A physical conduit to allow his magic to spark the dormant magic in her body to life, sort of a metaphysical jumpstart. Once that process had started there would be no going back, he would begin to transform unpredictably. It was almost as though the bond drained some of the energy he needed to control his change. He had only experienced the transformation once before—at puberty, as all the males of his kind did—it had *not* been an enjoyable experience. Not only was it painful, but he had also hated the loss of control over his own body when he changed and when the primitive instincts overtook his senses.

There would be only a short time—days, maybe as much as a week if he was lucky—in which to fully claim Megan. Unless he completed their bond he'd begin to transform more and more often, and eventually he would become trapped in the other body for good. His heart pounded with fear at the thought. He had to be successful. His father had assured him that once he claimed his mate, his body and mind would no longer fight the transformation. He'd have complete control of it, allowing him to choose when to change and stopping the pain. Of course, his father also claimed that what he was able to do was a gift, one he and his mate would learn to revel in.

Jack sincerely doubted it.

He thought fleetingly of the effect the bonding would have on Megan before dismissing it—she would adjust, the same way he would have to. She was attracted to him—he hadn't missed the appreciation on her face when she'd first entered the dining room. The sexual attraction between a shifter and one of the marked was always strong and for some that was enough. Even though it might mean spending the rest of your life bound to a woman who wanted to screw you every time she looked at you, but hated you while she did it. If he had to lose control over his body and his mind then at least he would be able to have some control over the reason why. He had grown up hearing his mother tell the story of how she and his father had met and fallen instantly in love. They had been married for thirty-five years now and seemed to be as happy together as ever. Jack wanted what his parents had. A Dearbh Ceangal. The Gaelic phrase literally meant "true bond". Where the mated pair were compatible in every way, soul mates. He now knew that he and Megan Cartwright could have that, if only he could persuade her of the same.

Finally she turned her attention his way again. "Can I take your order?"

She stood by his table, and though her voice and expression were friendly she was broadcasting her confusion and tension loudly. He made her uncomfortable even though she was convinced her imagination was running away with her.

Skeptical as she was, Jack realized convincing her otherwise was going to be difficult. "I'm fine, thank you. I just had coffee and something from the buffet." He gestured to the table brimming with fruit and cereal and smiled wryly as he thought of the struggle it had been to eat that much. He had already begun to lose weight, it would be nice to get his appetite back.

Shock and suspicion chased quickly over her face as his accent registered. Jack paused a moment, excitement and fear coursing through his veins—he was glad for the table as it hid the condition of his body. "Jack Douglass." He offered his hand, refusing to be deterred when she did not immediately take it.

After a moment's hesitation she decided she had no alternative and pressed her palm to his. "Megan Cartwright. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Douglass."

"Jack, please." He tightened his grip on her hand as she tried to withdraw it. Taking a deep breath he looked into her blue eyes and focused his mind on hers. He became aware of an aura of color surrounding her body. When he flicked a glance at their clasped hands he saw the silver of his own aura mingling with the white of hers. It was a spectacular sight and part of him mourned the fact that he would be the only one to see it. His vision blurred and he felt a sharp pain as a jolt of power surged through their joined hands.

When his vision cleared he saw the colors burn intensely for a second before fading. Megan gasped and pulled her hand away, quickly turning her back and walking into the kitchen.

Jack made no move to stop her. She had obviously felt the energy generated when they merged. She wouldn't be aware of any other effects. He, on the other hand, would. The prickling shimmer of magic that had filled the air between them was gone now but his skin still tingled and he felt lightheaded. It was done.

He stood on shaky legs to leave the dining room. He needed the privacy of his own room to recover properly. It would take a blood exchange between him and Megan to complete the bond and to do that he needed to get closer to her. Their newly formed link and his other senses should allow him to track her when he was ready. Her scent was now imprinted into his brain, marking her even more strongly as his. Besides, he thought wryly, he had her address.

All he had to do was seduce her.

Piece of cake.

Megan stood with her back against the kitchen door, heart pounding, and absently soothed her tingling hand. What had just happened there? There was no way Jack Douglass was telepathic. *Ridiculous!* But she could not deny he had indeed had an

American accent that sounded frighteningly like the one she had imagined as she entered the dining room. *It was a lucky guess, coincidence...that is all*, Megan told herself. She wasn't entirely convinced but there was no other explanation she was prepared to accept. Her mind was made up as her heart slowed to its usual rhythm. There was no need to see him again after today, and it was a small town but not too small to avoid Jack Douglass. She'd be on holiday and he would no doubt be gone by the time she returned.

Settled at last, she took a deep breath and went back to work, telling herself she was glad his seat was now empty, and ignoring the pang of disappointment from deep inside.

* * * * *

Jack awoke to find the pink and gold light from the setting sun shining through his hotel room window, painting the cream walls with color and giving glowing life to the dark wood furniture. He felt his mate's presence in his mind, an awareness that was difficult to describe, both comforting and arousing. A slight breeze stirred the curtains at the open window, bringing with it the scent of the sea and the distant sound of music from a car radio. He had slept the whole day away! By the time he had returned to his first-floor room after breakfast, his head had been reeling with dizziness and exhaustion had him dragging his steps. After hanging the *Do Not Disturb* sign and locking his door, he had kicked off his shoes, flopped down fully clothed on the green plaid duvet of the king-size bed, and been asleep in minutes.

While the room was no longer spinning around him, he still felt slightly lightheaded. Mind you, that could be due to the fact that he had gone all day with only some cereal and coffee when his body had already been lacking in fuel. Room service would definitely have to be his first priority... *Okay, second*, he thought as his bladder reminded him of this morning's coffee. Cautiously, he raised himself to his elbows before swinging his legs to the side of the bed and slowly standing. The corner of his

mouth curved in satisfaction when everything stayed where it should be. He stretched, groaning as the muscles in his back protested, before walking into the bathroom, scratching his chest absently.

Minutes later Jack emerged and headed for the phone on the nightstand to order lunch.

I'm hungry.

The feeling took him by surprise. It had been so long since he had enjoyed a meal that he was tempted to order the whole menu. Restraining the impulse with difficulty, he asked for soup and a sandwich instead. He had not had any appetite for a couple of weeks. Had in fact had to force himself to eat and knew that gorging now would only make him ill. This was yet another unsettling part of his heritage. While he could perhaps have ignored the desire to mate for longer, he could not go as long without food or sleep. Part of him had realized that he was basically starving and exhausting himself but the other part was pining for a mate. As the mating cycle progressed, those instincts had grown stronger and the appeal of food had declined. He knew that had he not found and linked with one of the marked, the rational—human—part of him would have eventually been overcome and he would have very slowly died.

It was the itching that stirred him from his reverie. The itch on his chest had gradually spread to the rest of his body. Instantly Jack's mind flashed back to that long-ago night when he was a teenager, and he knew that he was changing. Panicked, he threw off his clothes and watched as thick black hair forced its way from beneath his skin. He held his trembling hands up as his nails darkened and grew into sharp claws and his fingers seemed to shrink back into the now rough black skin of his palms. His eyes closed while his scalp tightened and his ears burned, but he knew the worst was still to come. Sweat sluiced down his face and back, he groaned low and hoarse, words beyond him, as he felt the burning sensation again just above his buttocks and knew he now had a tail. The pain began in his face and mouth then spread downwards as teeth, bone, muscle and joints reshaped themselves. His whole body was in agony...

Gradually the pain subsided. He fell forward as his back and hips became unable to support his upright position and he realized he was standing on four paws. Jack padded over to the full-length mirror on the wardrobe door and regarded with resignation the large animal staring back at him. All at once he was surrounded by sights, sounds and smells that even his normal sharp senses had been unaware of. It was difficult to associate the sleek black cat with himself, even having been surrounded with shifters all his life. For his kind the transformation was a very private thing and he had never actually seen it happen. The only memories he had of his own transformation as a boy was the pain of the shift and a confusion of alien urges and images of hunting. The animal's strength of will had swept him away until he didn't know who he was anymore.

His eyes closed as he again fought a battle against the instincts more familiar to this body.

With the knock at the door and the call of "room service" the battle was lost and the only thought in Jack's mind as he turned for the open window was *mate*.

* * * * *

Megan trailed into her flat just after sunset, kicking off her shoes and hitching up her skirt to peel off her tights, not even pausing as she tossed them with her bag through the open door of her bedroom. Wincing at the resulting crash, she carried on to the living room and dropped onto the threadbare blue couch with a groan, resting her feet on the small table in front of her. "It's time you learned to say 'no', Meg. N. O. Say it with me, it is not a difficult word. The next time that little weed of a manager asks you to work an extra shift... You. Say. No." She let her head drop onto the back of the couch. "And here you are, talking to yourself again!" *Maybe*, she thought with a smile, *I should get a cat or two. Then all the kids could call me "Crazy Meg, the cat lady who talks to herself", while they hide in the bushes sniggering at me. At least there would be a little bit of excitement in my life.*

In truth, she reflected grimly, she could not afford to say no to any extra shifts no matter how sore her feet got. The rent on the flat took up most of her paycheck and the rest just seemed to disappear into thin air. She liked the freedom her job gave her, but it might be time to look for something else that paid a little better. She studied the room around her, eyes touching on the pale blue walls with the framed posters adding splashes of color. The floor was just plain wood that she had sanded and varnished. A wooden coffee table she had also refinished sat on a woven rug in the same blue as the walls.

The rest of the furniture in the room was also secondhand, fixed to the best of her ability. Except for her CD player—which had been a Christmas gift to herself this year—and the small television and VCR she had won in a supermarket raffle last year. She smiled to herself as she remembered how she had choked on a grape she had just liberated from the fruit and vegetable display when her name had been announced over the supermarket loudspeaker. For a moment she had been convinced that security cameras were focused on her, the grape thief. She had not pinched another grape since, that's for sure.

However, despite the state of her finances she had every intention of ordering takeaway for dinner. She had earned it and she had not eaten since lunchtime. Thus justified, she mentally—because she could definitely not be bothered moving—flipped through the menus for her favorite Chinese and Indian takeaway and the nearby pizza place. *Decisions...decisions... Okay, Chinese it is...* Fighting off another attack of the guilts, she reached for the phone and ordered Mandarin chicken and fried rice.

As she replaced the receiver a silver picture frame on the table caught her attention, bringing to mind the eyes of Jack Douglass. Unconsciously her fingers caressed the place on her hand where she had felt that very strange jolt of pain when he introduced himself. Her lips quirked as she thought of that lean muscular body. The man was definitely hot. She could feel that heat even now. It was just a shame he had such a detrimental effect on her mental health. Overactive imagination or not, no one else had

made her hear voices in her head. Still, he was worth a fantasy or two, since she had no intention of ever seeing him again. She pried herself out of the hole she had sunk into, cursing the broken springs of the couch, and headed for the shower.

Chapter Two

The transformation made the trip to Megan's apartment a little more difficult than Jack had anticipated. Her scent outside the hotel had been faint, diluted by the oil and fuel scent of her car and the passage of strangers' feet. It made her harder to track and the animal in him wasn't exactly interested in following street signs. It was a miracle he hadn't been spotted. Lost in shadows, the journey through the small town had been both terrifying and fascinating.

As an adult he found that his sense of self was not so completely lost to the stronger personality of the cat. Once he became more accustomed to the new sensations, he regained some of his human perspective—it was sort of like sitting in the backseat while someone else was driving. He was aware that his actions and the things he was feeling were not normal, but there was nothing much he could do about it. Jack suspected that in time, if he felt strongly enough, he might be able to overrule the animal, but tonight he had not had much success. He was still more than a little disgusted that he had crept in the open kitchen door of a restaurant and stolen a big chunk of raw meat. He tried to tell himself it was just like eating a rare steak, only bigger... He snorted softly to himself...might've even worked if he didn't usually prefer his meat well done.

He crouched now, unseen, on the fire escape outside his mate's bedroom window. The room was nothing like he expected. Where he had thought she would surround herself with vibrant colors, he discovered that her room was pale lilac with white accents and a polished wood floor. As he watched through her lacy white curtains, she came out of the adjoining bathroom. His heart almost stopped. She was completely naked, her creamy, damp skin slightly flushed. As she reached up to loosen her corkscrew curls from the clip on top of her head, her lush breasts were thrust forward,

displaying tempting pink nipples. His fascinated gaze caressed her gently rounded stomach, lingered on the soft dark hair at the apex of her thighs, before continuing down the length of her legs. His searching eyes returned to the spot high up on her left thigh where he knew her birthmark lay, despite the fact that it was out of sight.

She began smoothing lotion onto her hands, arms and shoulders with long strokes. Her nipples puckered to points as she spread it onto her breasts, and his tail twitched from side to side as it dangled over the edge of the platform. She sat on the bed and lifted first one foot, then the other to rub the lotion there, then worked it up her calves and thighs. Her head was tilted back, eyes closed. Finally she relaxed back onto the pillows, dipped her fingers into her moist center and began to slowly tease herself.

Jack felt his claws extending, curling round the metal of the fire escape, as if to physically restrain himself. He focused on Megan's thoughts and saw it was him she fantasized about, and his control slipped another notch. He felt the sighs of pleasure she released and tension grew in his body along with frustration. When she took herself over the peak with his name on her lips, it took all his willpower to prevent himself from crashing through the window to get to her side as instinct demanded.

The doorbell rang, shattering the atmosphere. He growled low in his throat at the interruption. Megan turned to the window, head tilted to one side, a frown creasing her forehead, and he silenced himself abruptly. The bell chimed again and she quickly rose, pulled on a robe, bent to retrieve her purse from the floor and went down the hallway to the door.

Jack snarled when a few moments later she passed the open bedroom door carrying a delivery bag of food. Disappointment and anger swirled through his veins. It made the thick hair bristle on the back of his neck and he battled the cat's desire to roar out its frustration. It didn't want to leave—hell, neither did he—but he couldn't approach Megan in this form anyway. He rose, tension in every line of the cat's lithe body, and started down the fire escape determined to return for her in the morning.

* * * * *

“Good morning, Megandear!”

Megan paused with one bare foot on the stairway to freedom and groaned silently, rolling her eyes.

It's seven-thirty in the damn morning! What the heck is she doing up at this hour and how did she hear me? Slowly she turned back to the flat next door to her own and faced Mrs. Timms.

Lucille Timms was a small bird-like woman who could have been anything from eighty to a hundred and eighty. She was the most conscientious neighbor Megan could ever wish for. She was also nuttier than a fruitcake. Her wispy, shoulder-length hair was blue-rinsed today and held in place on top of her head by two blue ballpoint pens crossed like chopsticks. This morning she was wearing an off-the-shoulder blue and silver ball gown with a flared skirt, and on her feet were huge Tweety-bird slippers. Her face was heavily made up with dark red lipstick and silver eye shadow. At least the colors all pretty much matched today.

“Good morning, Mrs. Timms,” Megan replied, resigned.

“Is it not a glorious morning!” Mrs. Timms exclaimed in her upper-class English accent. Her eyes took in Megan’s strappy sundress, stuffed-to-the-brim straw bag, and the sandals she carried in her hand in the vain attempt to sneak past the door. “Are you off to the beach? How lovely. What a pretty dress you have on! Why don’t you have your shoes on, Megandarling, you’ll catch a chill.”

Megan remained silent since she wouldn’t have been able to squeeze a word in edgewise anyway, and waited for a break in the flow.

“George and I are off to the palace for a ball, it’s the most exciting thing!” George was Mrs. Timms’ husband. He had been dead for twenty years according to her son, whom Megan had met on one of his infrequent visits.

"Mrs. Timms..." She stopped, closing her eyes briefly. What was the point of distressing her, she would have forgotten again in about twenty minutes. "Yes," she smiled. "I am going to the beach. That's me on holiday now and I intend to relax."

Mrs. Timms beamed innocently at her. "Wonderful, Megandear. The weather is so lovely all the young men will have their swimsuits on and you will be able to pick out a good one. My George is hung like a horse, you know." Megan gaped at her, astonished, while she blithely continued. "I have a devil of a job fending the ladies off him when we go to the beach."

"Mrs. Timms, I really have to go or all the best spots on the beach will be taken," Megan hastily interrupted.

"Oh yes, you had better get on then. Have a lovely day, Megandear."

They exchanged goodbyes and Megan headed for the stairs again before she could hear anything else about George's attributes.

The sky was clear and blue, the air just beginning to warm up and the beach still empty of tourists when Megan arrived a couple of hours later. She had stopped off at the Sunday market first to pick up some fresh fruit and vegetables. It had been fun to search through the car boot sale as well, before the crowds made off with the best bargains.

After parking her car, Megan grabbed her bag and made her way between the sand dunes to her favorite little cove, knowing it was unlikely anyone would bother her there. Despite what she had said to Mrs. Timms, she hadn't expected the shore to be crowded, especially here at the very end, far away from the shops and cafés where people tended to gather.

She spread her blanket and sat down with a sigh of satisfaction, slipping off her sandals and digging out a book and the fruit she had bought for breakfast. It had been another long night filled with very little sleep, but this time she was perfectly aware of who and what she had dreamed of. Jack Douglass and hot, sweaty, mind-numbing

sex—it was her own fault for indulging herself last night. She had never been so affected by a man before, particularly not one she had hardly even spoken to. Damn, even the thought of him made her squirm. Finishing her fruit, she lay back on the blanket and closed her eyes, prepared to soak up some vitamin D.

A few minutes later a shadow fell over her face, disturbing her contemplation of the back of her eyelids, and her eyes blinked open. There, as if her earlier musings had conjured him, was Jack Douglass.

“Hello again,” he grinned at her while his eyes did a slow sweep of her body. “Megan, isn’t it? From the hotel?”

Megan sat up quickly but resisted the urge to cover herself—she was fully dressed, after all—and raised a hand to shade her eyes while she looked up at him. “Mr. Douglass, good morning. A little out of the way of things aren’t you?” *In other words, what the hell are you doing here?* She gave him a once-over of her own. He was dressed in a pair of khaki trousers and a white polo shirt. Barefoot, he carried a pair of battered trainers in one hand and a rolled-up towel in the other. Silver-framed sunglasses hooked in the open collar of his shirt where she could just see a hint of crisp dark hair. She had been right in the restaurant—he was tall, around six feet, give or take a couple of inches. He towered over her.

“Jack,” he corrected, drawing her eyes back to his face. “I prefer to be away from the crowds and it looked kind of secluded up here.” He looked at her assessingly. “You don’t mind if I join you, do you? I promise I’ll stay out of your way.”

Yes, I mind! She shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

Megan watched dry-mouthed as he spread his towel out a few feet away and whipped off his shirt, revealing a muscular golden body only slightly marred by the fact that his ribs were clearly visible. As if he’d recently lost weight. *Why is he so thin when the rest of him is obviously fit?* There was a sprinkling of dark hair over his chest, tapering into a thin line past his navel and disappearing into the waistband of his trousers. Heat rushed to her face as she imagined tracing that trail with her tongue. Jack

cleared his throat and her gaze flew back to meet the molten silver heat of his. Heat flushed her face. Hastily she tore her attention away from him and picked up her book. Stretching out on her side, she opened it to her bookmark and settled in to ignore temptation.

Jack drew a deep breath as he tried to bring his body back under control. When Megan finally acted on those erotic fantasies, she was going to kill him. Was it possible for a man to expire from an excess of pleasure? He didn't know but he was very willing to experiment. He studied her in silence. Her hair was once again caught up in a clip, though a few renegade strands had escaped to frame her face. The white dress she wore emphasized the paleness of her skin and he noted the dark shadows under her eyes. She had slept poorly again last night; he had, too.

It had been an eventful night, he thought wryly. He had just managed to get back to his room when he had begun to change back. It had hurt just as much as the first time. He shuddered as he remembered the pain and disorientation. As if all that had already happened hadn't been enough to disturb his sleep, he then realized something his father hadn't told him about the bond with Megan. They shared dreams. He had come closer to a wet dream last night than he had since he was a teenager. He had tried in vain to block her as he did with her thoughts, but it seemed that dreams worked differently. If this was how close he and Megan were now when the binding was not complete, what would it be like when they were one? The thought caused a wave of arousal and anticipation to wash through him.

His thoughts were interrupted by Megan's sigh as she gave in to her curiosity. "So, Jack, are you here on business or holiday?" She closed her eyes and laughed. "I cannot believe I actually just asked that."

"At least you didn't say business or pleasure," he answered with a smile. "Actually, I'm here on...family business, but I'm sure I'll find the pleasure too." He let his eyes caress her body suggestively, grinning at the color that flooded her face. "What about you? Not working today?"

"Nope. I'm on holiday now too, for a couple of weeks."

"Then you could show me all there is to see in the area, huh?" He read the hesitation in her expression. "Please, spend the day with me." *What harm could it do?* he whispered into her mind. "We can do anything you'd like."

"I'll think about it," she conceded, and gave her attention back to her book. Resigned, Jack lay back on the towel to enjoy the sunshine. He would have to take some kind of action soon, but he was reluctant to force things too quickly. He had a feeling this was going to be difficult enough. Megan did not seem the type to just give in to anyone's demands.

After a while spent in companionable silence Jack began to shift uneasily. The hair on the back of his neck prickled and he glanced at Megan to find her eyes were still on her book. Someone was watching them. He sat up and looked around—there was no one visible, but he could feel eyes on him. It was probably nothing, someone hoping for a cheap thrill, but it made him uncomfortable. While he scanned the little bit of the beach he could see, the feeling passed and he guessed that whoever it was had found something more interesting to watch. He looked at Megan and saw she too was examining the shoreline uncertainly.

Abruptly she looked at him and announced, "All right," even as he heard her mind protesting. *This is a really bad idea, Megan. He could be a serial killer.*

He stifled the laughter that tried to escape and smiled at her instead. "Thank you. I promise I will take good care of you."

Megan looked uncertainly at his amused face. "Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of," she grumbled under her breath. *Either that or I will lose what's left of my mind and take care of you instead.* The man was a stranger, going with him was no doubt dangerous. She certainly was not the most trusting of people but oddly enough she just wasn't afraid of Jack, and the more time she spent around him the more she wanted him.

At a loss as to what to do with him now that she had agreed, she suggested the first thing that came into her head. "Why don't we go to The Cliffs for lunch then decide

what we want to do?" Almost at once she wished the words back. The Cliffs bar and restaurant was a place she ate at occasionally because it had a wonderful view and an excellent lunchtime special. It was also four miles outside of town, which meant she'd have to be alone in a car with this stranger. *Stupid, Megan.* Even as she tried to think of a way to get out of it, he was holding out a hand to help her up.

"Sounds good," he said, pulling her to her feet.

Yes it does. That's the problem.

* * * * *

They spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around various car boot sales after Jack discovered Megan's fondness of it. She had laughed at his dumbfounded expression at the term and patiently explained that they were like "an open-air market crossed with a rummage sale".

The day passed quickly and as he got to know her, Jack realized he could not have made a better choice to be his mate. She was open and friendly and shared his dry sense of humor. It had been a very long time since he had enjoyed a woman's company as much.

Their conversation didn't tell him much more about her life than he already knew, though he found himself wishing he had waited to hear the details from her own lips instead of reading them in a report. She was an only child whose parents died when she was eighteen, leaving just enough to clear up bills and leave a small nest-egg—for a drought she said, since this was Scotland and rainy days were common. The rest of her family was scattered all over the world and she really was not close to any of them.

They took their time over dinner and coffee. Jack was bemused by the fact that he couldn't even remember afterwards just what they had eaten.

Despite his preoccupation with Megan, he had gotten that same feeling that he was being watched on several occasions throughout the day. He never actually saw anyone,

though, so he concluded that Megan's presence was making him paranoid. He knew that there could be other shapeshifters out looking for a mate. It would be the ultimate irony if, now that he had found a woman he believed he could spend the rest of his life with, someone else were to come and steal her away. Another blot on the landscape of his sunny day was that, in the back of his mind, he was constantly aware that he might change.

Megan glanced covertly at the man sitting in the passenger seat gazing at the sun setting over the sea as they approached the Bay. She was glad she had followed her instincts and agreed to go with him, and wasn't ready to see the day end.

Megan parked the car in front of her building and turned to face him. "Would you like to come back to my flat for a drink?"

Jack smiled slowly at her. "Sure, I'd love to."

Well, that's fairly promising. Her heart beat a little harder as she considered the possibilities. *Oh yeah, there is no way he is going back to the hotel tonight.* She was astonished at her own brazenness, this just wasn't like her. True, he was sex on legs but she had known the man less than a day and she wanted to throw him on the ground and ravish him. If the looks he had been sending her all day meant anything, he felt the same way.

They climbed out of the vehicle and she looked at Jack again in the fading light. "Are you allergic to something?"

"What?"

She nodded at his hands. "You've been scratching them for the last few minutes."

His gaze flew to his hands and she watched as what looked disconcertingly like panic traced over his features. "Uh, no. Megan... I have to go..." Even as he spoke he was backing away.

"But, I thought you were coming up for a drink?" She frowned at him, puzzled.

"I know, but I can't... I just remembered something I have to do."

"Jack..."

"Thanks for today. I'll call you in the morning."

Before she could get another word out he walked swiftly around the corner and Megan was left standing alone in front of her door, anger gradually overtaking bewilderment.

Well, that's just great! There is only one thing to do when you are this pissed off at a man. Ice cream, followed swiftly by chocolate and vast quantities of apricot brandy. After all that, she'd be too sick to think about how angry she was at Jack Douglass. Turning on one heel she marched purposefully in the direction of the twenty-four hour minimarket nearby.

By the time Megan had made her purchases her temper had simmered down a bit. Maybe she had misread his signals. *Yeah, right.* As her mind replayed the events of the day it occurred to her that she had talked a lot about herself while learning very little about him. She knew that he belonged to a close-knit family and that he had one younger brother. He mentioned that he was here on family business for himself and his parents, but he had hinted that he had his own fairly successful company. He was a strange one, all right, but that didn't seem to matter to her hormones. At least nothing weird had happened—well, until now that is... *Maybe he has performance issues...* The thought made her snort in disbelief.

She had just stepped off the kerb onto the deserted road when the sudden roaring of an engine and the screech of wheels made her heart slam into her throat. Her feet seemed to be glued to the concrete as she squinted against powerful headlights that were all too close and getting closer. Before she had time to draw breath to scream, something slammed into her, pushing her out of the path of the oncoming car. A glimpse of black was all she caught as she made solid contact with the pavement and the car sped past in a blur of white paint and red taillights.

Megan lay stunned on the concrete, her heart was racing and breath coming in whimpers which quickly turned into soft groans as various body parts began to ache in protest. Only two facts were able to penetrate her adrenaline-soaked brain while she pushed herself into a sitting position. Someone had nearly run her down. Someone had saved her life. "GOD DAMMIT! Where did you get your license!" she yelled belatedly at the empty street. Tremors racked her body as she checked her injuries—a skinned elbow, a bump on her head and a bruised backside. Her white dress would never be the same again. Lucky, compared to the alternative.

Slowly she picked herself up off the ground. Spotting the plastic bag containing her emergency rations, she limped over to investigate their condition. It was a measure of her emotional state that the sight of the intact bottle of apricot brandy and tub of ice cream started her sobbing.

By the time she reached her flat she had pulled herself together, more or less, although it had been a relief to see no light shining under Mrs. Timms' door. Her face felt hot and her head ached from the crying jag. She was dirty, her hair was probably standing on end and she'd discovered more sore muscles than she knew she had as she climbed the stairs.

To add to her problems she was horny. *Damn him for running off like that! I need a drink, a really, really big one*, she sniffed. She considered and dismissed the idea of calling the police. There would be absolutely nothing they could do since she hadn't seen much and there had been no one else around. It had probably been stupid young boys joyriding, and they would be long gone by now. Besides, she did not think she could face any more trauma tonight.

She made her way through the living room to the kitchen, stopping on the way to pull off her sandals and open the window to let some air in. After she poured her drink she took it and the tub of ice cream and a spoon back to the living room. Intent on fighting with the lid on the tub, she was in the middle of the room by the time she

raised her head. Her triumphant expression froze as she came face to face with an enormous black panther.

Chapter Three

Megan noisily sucked in air for a scream that froze in her lungs. The cat stood in front of the open fire escape window, tail twitching, eyes focused intently on her face. Cursing inwardly at the stupidity of leaving the window open even a little bit, she made a mental note to never do it again...if she lived.

The sheer size of the body under that sleek black coat was breathtaking, not to mention the power evident in those muscles. Megan whimpered as she caught sight of the sharp claws just visible on its feet. "Holy crap, someone up there has a really sick sense of humor. When I said I should get a cat, this is not what I meant!" she whispered. The cat snorted and her heart lodged in her throat.

Slowly she raised her glass to her lips, ice rattling as her hand shook, and downed the drink before setting everything on the edge of the table between her and the animal. Cautiously she began to edge towards the hallway door, stopping abruptly when a low rumbling growl filled the room and the cat narrowed its eyes at her. "Okay Meg, stay calm, who do you call when you have a panther in your living room? RSPCA? Cats Protection League?" A hysterical giggle slipped past her lips before she could prevent it.

Without taking her eyes off of the cat, she reached out to the table again in search of the phone, but as her hand made contact with the receiver the cat growled again. Megan snatched her hand back, "Okay...nice kitty... No phone calls, huh?" Her voice quavered, rising with her panic. The cat's ears swiveled towards her and it fell silent again. She eyed the beast warily as it sat down, displaying some impressive equipment. *Okaaay, so you're definitely a boy cat.* "So, what do we do now?" The cat tilted his head at her as she talked. "We can't just stay here all night, besides, I really need to sit down. I had a little mishap a while ago and I'm a bit s-s-s..." Her mindless chatter stuttered to a

halt as the panther got to his feet and prowled around the table towards her. Closing her eyes she stood motionless as he brushed past her, not daring to even move her head to see where he was going. Suddenly something bumped into her butt and she let out a startled shriek. She spun around, hands raised to ward off an attack, only to feel that same bump on her hip this time. Cracking one eye open, she peered down to see the cat nudging her with the top of his head. Incredibly, she realized she was being urged towards the couch.

Jack pushed Megan again. He couldn't believe he was actually doing this but after that car had nearly hit her he really needed to be with her, make sure she was all right. The cat's instincts also said he had to be with his mate, to protect her. The need had overrun his caution and before he knew it he had been standing in her living room. Now he had to do something to calm her down, because she was clearly terrified. Talking to her mentally might just shove her over the edge—she had been through too much already tonight. No, he thought, it was better to let her get used to the cat before he revealed he was also telepathic...and a shapeshifter.

He watched as she inched down onto the couch, then he sat on the carpet in front of her so that their eyes were level. Her hands were clenched together in her lap and the knuckles turned white as he slowly bent his head towards them. He ran his rough tongue over her fingers, tasting the salt of her earlier tears, then nudged her hands with his nose. Megan gasped, "You want me to touch you?" He glanced at her face and laid his head in her lap as she gingerly unclasped her hands and touched his head. Gradually she grew bolder and she began to explore his soft fur and the sensitive skin beneath it. When her fingers found the sweet spot behind his ear and scratched, he could not contain a groan of pleasure. The fingers froze but when he continued to rest his head passively on her thighs, enjoying the sweet scent of her body, she carried on with her investigation.

Megan smiled wonderingly. *He's so soft. God, I never imagined I'd ever get a chance to experience something like this.*

Jack unashamedly eavesdropped, catching her thought as she ran her hands over his shoulders. The purring startled them both, it was an unconscious reaction and he made no attempt to stop it. Megan laughed delightedly, earlier fear all but forgotten.

"You like that, huh? Where did you come from? You're so tame, someone must be looking for you." *There must be someone I can contact to see where you escaped from.* Deliberately Jack projected a picture of pacing in a dirty, too-small cage. *Tomorrow is soon enough*, Megan told herself.

She ran her hands along his spine, brushing the fur the wrong way and smoothing it back, causing his skin to twitch at the strange feeling. *Black as midnight... Black...* Her hands paused again and he lifted his head as he anticipated the conclusion of her thoughts. "Was that you?" she whispered. "No way, now I'm being crazy." He met her gaze and saw the knowledge in her eyes.

"Okay, I've had enough, I'm going to bed." She stood up with a groan, picked up her tub of ice cream, and gestured to the window, "I don't know where you came from but it would certainly be easier if you'd go back there."

It probably would be wiser if he left, but he found himself walking to the hall doorway instead. Megan followed him, stopping on her way to toss the half-melted dessert into the freezer. "You can't stay here, what would I tell the neighbors!?" He ignored her and continued into the bedroom. "I can't afford to feed you!" He sat at the foot of her bed and waited. "All right, dammit, but I *am* calling someone in the morning!" She marched into the bathroom, closing the door firmly. A few minutes later he heard the shower start up.

Megan moaned in pleasure as the hot water sluiced over her battered body. She could hardly believe the events of the last couple of hours. *Maybe I'm suffering from a head injury and this is all an hallucination.* She half-expected to come to at any minute and find herself still lying on the pavement outside. Had that blur of black been the cat? It

certainly seemed intelligent enough and its speed would explain why she hadn't seen anything before she hit the ground. It made as much sense as finding the huge creature in her living room. Where had it come from, and why her flat? Someone had to have trained him so he was probably valuable. It was possible he had escaped from a cage like the one she had pictured earlier. She knew that she would have to return him but the thought made her stomach hurt. Quickly she finished her shower, dried off and pulled on the nightshirt hanging on the back of the door. *Maybe he'll be gone.*

She walked back into her bedroom to find the cat stretched full length on her bed. "Oh, no way! Get off of there." When he ignored her she pulled futilely on the corner of the quilt. He raised his head from her spare pillow and she swore she could read amusement in his eyes. Panting and exhausted, she gave up and crawled into the other side of the bed. "You better not have fleas," she mumbled. Her eyes drifted shut and as she tumbled into sleep, the word "Goodnight" whispered into her mind.

The street was dark and deserted. Jack noticed little else as he raced for the safety of the streetlights ahead. Behind him he could hear the scream of an overtaxed engine as the car sped after him. Glancing over his shoulder he saw the headlights gaining and desperately tried to convince his body to go faster. His throat burned with the rasp of his breath, his chest tightened from the want of oxygen, his paws felt raw from the friction of the concrete. Sanctuary seemed no closer. Movement caught his eye and he turned to see his mate running alongside him.

In the shadows to the side, Megan could see the cat keeping pace with her and tried to call out to it, but it merely looked at her with familiar eyes and vanished. Hearing the rasp of someone else breathing, she looked again to the shadows and saw Jack. His face hard with determination, he reached for her hand and ran with her towards the streetlights. Her legs ached and trembled with the strain and she imagined she could feel the heat from the engine close behind them. Heart pounding, she pushed on. Just as she thought all was lost they tumbled into the golden pool of light and all was silent.

Then the burning began, the light that before had represented safety turned on them and heat engulfed them, dissolving the clothes from their bodies so that its hungry flames could reach their skin –

The nightmare released Jack from its grip with a suddenness that left him disoriented. Still in his feline form, he lay on Megan's bed. Beside him, she too quieted as if now that he was awake the fire had been deprived of fuel. Another wave of heat washed over him, and he realized that he was on the verge of shifting again and the illusion of fire had been his addition to the dream. He had only intended on staying with Megan until she fell asleep but as he glanced towards the room window he saw the lightening of the dawn sky. Checking one last time that she now slept peacefully, he slid off of the bed, padded silently through the apartment and out of the window.

* * * * *

Having safely retrieved his clothes and other belongings from the hedgerow where he had hurriedly stuffed them last night, Jack returned to his hotel room. He was exhausted from the shift and his cock ached with lust for the woman he had left. He had to have her, she was his.

If he were a normal man, he thought bitterly, he would be waking up warm and satisfied beside Megan right now. He pulled on clean jeans and a soft black shirt. Then again, if he were a normal man he would probably never have met Megan. He didn't even want to consider that.

The thought brought to mind Megan's accident last night. Being the cat did have some advantages. Quick as he was as a man, he could never have reached her in time. His hands trembled as he remembered how close it had been, his tail had actually brushed the car as it passed. Megan believed it had been joyriders and she was probably right, but Jack recalled the times yesterday he had felt they were being

watched. Still, who would want to hurt her, and why? The answer was, of course, no one. He dismissed it from his mind for the moment, resolving to be more vigilant—just in case.

In the meantime, he had to go back to her apartment. He had some explaining to do after abandoning her last night and he had no idea what he was going to tell her. Whatever else happened, he was determined to make up for the unfulfilled promise of the night. He swore; it all might have been over if the change had not got in the way. It was only going to get worse as his transformations came more frequently. He was rapidly running out of time.

* * * * *

Megan sat at the dark wooden table in her kitchen drinking coffee and refusing to feel disappointed that the cat had been gone when she woke this morning. It was for the best really, this way she wouldn't have to feel guilty about turning him in. Of course that would not stop anyone else from doing it. She only hoped he would be okay.

The knock caused her to jump. Hissing in annoyance, she licked the cooling drink off of her fingers and placed the cup on the draining board before making her way to the door. It was still early and she could not think of anyone who would be knocking at her door at this time unless, her expression brightened, it was the postman with her latest book order. She opened the door and the look of anticipation slid off her face. *Jack.*

"Hi." He stuck his hands in his pockets and his gaze took in her fitted blue T-shirt and tight jeans.

She ignored the resulting spark of heat. "Morning," she replied, her tone more of a statement than a greeting.

"I need to apologize and explain about last night."

Megan waited, one hand on the door. *This had better be good.*

"I had to call my parents." As she stepped back inside and began to close the door he continued in a rush. "Really, they're on vacation. This was the last chance to speak to them for the next week because they'll be staying at their cabin and it doesn't have any phones." As he spoke, he edged past her into the flat. "I promised I would call and update them on the business." They stood facing each other in the narrow hallway, bodies nearly touching.

"That is just about the worst excuse I have ever heard, so it must be true. I felt like an idiot, Jack." Megan shut the door, resisting the urge to slam it, and headed for the kitchen, knowing he would follow.

"I'm sorry." He stood so close behind her that she felt his breath stir her hair, causing a shiver to chase down her spine. She stepped away from him, taking a clean mug from a cupboard and pouring him a cup of coffee. She turned abruptly to hand it to him only to discover those fabulous eyes of his had been fixed to her backside.

"I'm up here, Jack." She refused to be affected by the heat she saw in his gaze when he lifted his head.

"Those are really great jeans." His voice had deepened and she swore she could feel the vibration of it as their fingertips connected on the handle of the mug. *Okay, maybe I'll be a little affected.* His eyes held both heat and that trace of amusement. "I like your T-shirt, too. It really draws attention to your...eyes." Megan's face flushed and she could not help but smile at his outrageous comment as she looked down and saw that, without the constriction of a bra, the thin fabric outlined her nipples.

Jack placed the untouched coffee on the worktop and slowly advanced as Megan began to back away from him.

"I'm still angry at you."

"I know." She found herself backed against the table as Jack continued to stalk her. Excited butterflies fluttered in her stomach. He was so overwhelmingly masculine, he seemed to fill her little kitchen with his presence. He placed a hand on either side of her body, trapping her in a loose embrace. She could smell him, soap mixed with an

indefinable scent that was all his own. Her heart began to beat a little faster and she moistened her lips in anticipation.

His hands moved to her waist and he bent his head and brushed her mouth with his own once, twice. His tongue traced her lips demanding entry and when she complied, he responded with a hunger that belied his initial gentleness. His hips pushed against hers, the hard length of his erection bulging behind his jeans. Her tongue thrust and dueled with his for control of the kiss as her hands came up to grasp his shoulders. Hands slid up beneath her T-shirt to cup her breasts and a bolt of heat shot straight to her core as his thumbs brushed over her nipples.

She gasped and Jack broke away from her lips long enough to pull her top over her head. Her hands went immediately to his shirt, quickly unbuttoning it and sliding it off of his shoulders to drop to the floor. He unfastened and stripped off her jeans and panties while she explored his powerful shoulders and hair-dusted chest, his breath caught when she ran her nails lightly over his nipples. She watched as they beaded, then caressed his firm buttocks as she pushed his underwear and jeans over his hips. He caught the waistband before it could slip to his ankles and groped in his pocket for a foil-covered condom. She took it from him, opened it and began smoothing the thin latex onto his cock with shaking hands. He groaned and moved her hands back to his shoulders and finished sheathing himself with a practiced stroke.

"I want you too much," he murmured, "and if you touch me like that it'll be over before we get started." Catching her waist he lifted her onto the table, drawing her knees apart to make a place for himself. The shock of the cold surface on her buttocks made her suck in her breath. She leaned back on her elbows. Jack dipped his head to her breasts, suckling one while his fingers teased the other, switching to give each equal attention. He lifted his head and met her eyes as he blew gently on her engorged nipples, causing her back to arch in a silent appeal for the damp heat of his mouth again. His hands gripped her hips and Megan's eyes flickered closed while he kissed his way down the center of her body, pausing to swirl his tongue in her navel. She

whimpered in frustration when his mouth brushed teasingly over the curls at the apex of her legs and down to nuzzle and nip the inside of her thigh where her birthmark lay. A chocolate-brown blotch about the size of a ten-pence coin orbited by smaller spots, it vaguely resembled a paw print. Her mother had once told her it was inherited from her side of the family. *What the heck am I doing thinking about my mother!*

Jack's mouth left her but before she could catch her breath his hand released her hip and she felt one long finger slip into her, testing, before it was joined by another. Impossibly, she felt her cheeks heat further as he discovered how wet she was. Her eyes flew open and she cried out as she felt his tongue part her so that he could close his lips around her clitoris, sucking gently as he thrust his fingers in and out of her. When she felt her muscles begin to contract she brought her hands up, fisted them in his hair and dragged his head back up to her mouth for another desperate kiss, tasting herself.

"I want you inside me when I come," she whispered.

For an instant Jack's thick, hard cock slid against her own swollen flesh, his hips bucked against hers and his body quivered with restraint. "Not yet." He moved back and his fingers thrust into her once again.

She moaned into his mouth as he circled her clit with his thumb, his tongue mimicking the action of his fingers. Her breathing growing frantic, Megan raked her hands through his hair and over his shoulders and back. His mouth drew a damp path around to nibble on her lobe, his breathing harsh in her ear and his voice strained as he whispered "Now!" and pressed his thumb hard on her clit.

Megan groaned as she flew over the edge, her body convulsing as she felt his cock filling her with one slow thrust. Her legs wrapped around his hips, they began to move together, faster and faster until she felt Jack reach his own completion, his shout filling the room, followed by her own in another shattering climax.

The world faded back in slowly. Megan stroked her hands down the muscles of Jack's back, reveling in his weight and the heat of his breath on her neck. Jack groaned

softly and she chuckled, hardly believing she had just taken part in a kitchen-table sex scene. "I don't think this table was designed for this, you know."

He lifted his head and met her eyes. "Do I look like I care?" Conveniently her hand was stroking his tight buttock and she slapped it once hard. "You will if it collapses underneath us." He yelped and she soothed the sting.

"Okay, that's true," he smiled at her as she felt his cock harden inside her again. Her body tingled with the knowledge. "Guess we better be quicker this time."

Chapter Four

“What’s wrong?” Jack’s own mind was spinning, but he was aware of Megan’s turmoil as they lay together wrapped in a cotton throw. Temporarily sated, they had stumbled as far as the living room couch where they had both drifted into sleep.

“Nothing,” she replied. “I’m just worried about the cat.”

It was now early afternoon and when they had woken up Megan had told him about her strange feline visitor of the previous night. He noticed with mild amusement that she left out a lot of the details. He ran his fingertips lightly along the creamy skin of her arm. He could not believe he hadn’t performed the blood exchange. He’d had plenty of opportunity—you couldn’t get much closer than they had just been. Hell, he could even do it right now. It didn’t take much blood from either of them, just a few sips, and it would only be once. The thought of drinking someone’s blood—even Megan’s—made him feel faintly sick. Since he was not looking forward to the process much himself, he knew there was little chance of Megan doing it voluntarily. The problem was he didn’t want to force or trick her into it anymore.

He wanted her to choose to be with him.

He wanted her to trust him.

“You think he will be all right?” She lifted her head from his chest to look at him.

“I’m sure he’s fine.”

“But anything could have happened to him.” She sat up, holding a corner of the throw over her breasts with one hand. “He could have been hit by a car, or someone could have captured him, maybe he’s locked up in a cage. D’you think it would be on the news?”

His amusement faded and he watched helplessly knowing that her distress was his fault. He made his decision—it could be dangerous, but if he wanted her to trust him

this would be the first step. "Megan," his voice wavered a bit. He grasped her shoulders as she reached for the television remote intent on turning on the news. Clearing his throat he looked into her eyes and tried again. "Megan, I need to tell you something." She looked at him, impatience turning to wariness as she studied his face. He took a deep breath. "I'm a shapeshifter...the cat in your apartment last night was me."

For an agonizing instant there was complete silence in the apartment. Jack watched Megan's face, seeing astonishment, disbelief and finally anger reflected there before she spoke.

"That is not funny, Jack. I don't know whether you are trying to make a fool of me but I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and believe that was meant to be a joke." She flung the edge of her cover towards him and stood frowning, hands on her hips, oblivious to the fact she was naked. Afternoon sunshine filtered through the half-closed vertical blinds at the window, bringing out red highlights in her hair and illuminating her pale skin.

Jack's mind went blank as he gaped at her. *God, she's beautiful.*

"I realize you probably think I'm being stupid, after all, he is just an animal. But Jack, there's something about him..." her voice trailed off. "Are you even listening to me?"

He brought his attention back to her blue eyes, appalled at his daydreaming, and his nerves once again overtook his hormones. She looked down at herself...*naked*...and abruptly whipped the throw from where it was bundled on his lap, eyes widening at the half-erect cock, which hadn't quite got the message from his brain. As she put the barrier of the coffee table between them, he grabbed one of the small cushions from the couch and covered himself, feeling ridiculous. She didn't believe him. It almost was funny...almost.

"Megan, I wasn't joking."

She narrowed her eyes at him, shifting her attention from the material she was tucking in above her breasts and studying him. "My God, you are serious, aren't you?" He nodded. "Well, that is wonderful!" Hitching up the throw with one hand so she wouldn't trip, she began to pace up and down the length of the small table, gesturing wildly with her free hand. "The first guy I have sex with in three years and he turns out to be certifiable." She shot a glance at him as she passed. "This is what I get for sleeping with someone I met two days ago. Guess that makes me nuts, too." She stopped and pointed a finger at him. "This is your fault, you know. I never do this, then you come along with that body and that smile and those fuck-me eyes."

His brows lifted at the uncharacteristic curse. "Megan, I am not crazy. It really is true. I am a shapeshifter and I turned into the cat that was in your apartment last night."

"Fine, prove it," she challenged, folding her arms.

He thought for a moment. "You wear a nightshirt to bed."

She shook her head. "Too easy. Besides the fact that half the population probably does, you could have seen that lying on the end of my bed." Skepticism was clear in her expression.

"You told me I 'better not have fleas' before you climbed into bed with me." Jack watched the battle in her eyes as she absorbed the fact that there was no way he could know that unless he had been there, but as he was rapidly learning, she was a true skeptic.

Anger darkened her eyes again as her mind provided the logical answer, "You spied on me! You were on the fire escape!"

Jack's thoughts immediately went to the night he *had* watched her from the fire escape and knew guilt was evident in his face before he could suppress it.

She spun around and started towards the kitchen. Briefly he considered using telepathy but quickly discarded the idea. She would only consider it to be another way he could have known what happened last night. It was bad enough she thought he had

been physically spying on her, she would probably go up in flames when she discovered he could read her thoughts. He followed her and discovered her stumbling over the end of her makeshift robe as she retrieved his clothes from where they lay scattered around the floor. "I was not spying on you."

She ignored him, muttering under her breath, Scottish accent broadening with every angry step so that he caught only the occasional words. "Idiot... Dammit... Crazy..."

Jack strode over to her and tossed the cushion onto the kitchen table—it wasn't as if she hadn't seen everything he had anyway. Then he pulled her gently up by her shoulders to face him. He felt his clothes brush against his abdomen as she clutched them in between their bodies. "I know because I was here. What do I have to do to prove it to you?"

Megan's gaze met his and he knew he was not going to like what came next. "Show me." He released her and took a step back as she continued. "Change into the cat right here, right now, and I'll believe you."

He closed his eyes, acutely aware of his failure to complete the bonding. "I can't."

She thrust his clothes at him. "I didnae think so!"

He took them without protest and dressed as he spoke. "I don't control when the cat comes. There is no pattern to it." She watched him silently and he continued. "That's why I left in such a hurry the other night. The scratching was a sign that the change was coming."

She tilted her head. "Or it could just have been allergies." she said.

"Okay, so how do you explain a wild animal saving your life then coming to your apartment and spending the night on your bed?" he asked, frustrated.

"Well, obviously he was tame and well-trained."

He shook his head. "Will you at least give me time to prove it to you? I want to see you again, Megan. I need to see you." Jack followed as she started towards the door. He

thought she looked a little less skeptical but that could just have been wishful thinking. They stood face to face once more by the front door and Jack couldn't resist tracing one finger down her flushed cheek. He could see her anger, hurt and confusion. Her voice was clipped as anger again won the battle.

"I'll think about it, but for now I want you to leave." She reached behind her and opened the door.

"All right, I'll go, but I won't wait around for you to call, Megan. I want you and I am going to have you." He stepped out the door, wincing as she slammed it shut behind him.

Megan slumped against the wall by the door, closed her eyes and let her head drop back with a thud as the anger began to slip away. *I really hope Mrs. Timms was out walking with George, she thought with a sigh. I will never hear the end of it if she saw Jack leaving. I can't even think about her reaction if she heard us shouting or...other things.* At the thought, her eyes flew open and her temper flared again as she pushed away from the wall and headed for the living room.

"What was he thinking? Does he think I am stupid?" Angrily she swept around the room gathering her discarded clothes and straightening the cushions on the couch. "Actually, I take that back. He doesn't think it, he knows it. I believed that poor example of an excuse, after all." When she tripped over the end of the throw again, she tossed it on the floor in front of the washing machine and continued her tidying frenzy naked. Thankfully she came to her senses just as she was contemplating dragging the vacuum cleaner out of the cupboard. "See what he's done to me?! I almost vacuumed!" Dragging her hands through her tangled hair, she caught her reflection in the mirror on the living room wall. She looked like some kind of fanatical nudist, her cheeks flushed and her curly hair like a bird's nest. *How come Julia Roberts' hair never looked like this after she spent all night rolling around with Richard Gere?*

"Okay, maybe I overreacted a bit," she said to her reflection, "After all, the man can't help it if he's got a few screws loose." Megan would be the first to admit that she could have a short temper, but it was not like her to blow up like that. She could only assume that her insomnia was catching up with her.

A long, hot bath followed by dinner restored her humor but also gave her too much time to think. When she found herself alternately fantasizing about Jack and watching the fire escape window for the cat, she knew she had to do something. Hands on hips she surveyed her empty flat, picked up the phone and did what women have no doubt been doing for centuries when having man troubles. She called on her best friend.

* * * * *

"All right, care to tell me exactly why I am going to work tomorrow with a hangover?" Jayne Davis was tall and slim with fair skin, fiery red hair and light green eyes that Megan admitted she was a little jealous of. She had come straight from work and was still wearing black trousers and the bright green shirt with the company logo in red on the pocket.

They had been friends since they had been three years old and their mothers had met on the beach. After a short disagreement when Jayne dumped a bucket of sand on Megan's lap, the toddlers had become inseparable. The car crash that had killed Megan's parents had also killed Jayne's mother. The two couples had decided to go out for the evening but Jayne's father had to work late and was going to meet them later. It was Megan's dad who had been driving the car when it skidded on ice and hit a railway bridge, killing him and the two women. Jayne's father had never forgiven himself for not being with them and had begun drinking. Four years ago he got drunk one last time and crashed his car into the same bridge and died.

Jayne had retreated from everyone but Megan. A gifted artist, she gave up her teaching post at the nearby university and took a job at a supermarket. No matter what

Megan said to her, she no longer joked about “drawing her way around the world” as she had once. In fact, she rarely went out at all. When she wasn’t at work or with Megan, she spent all her time reading.

Megan retrieved two wineglasses from the cupboard before turning to answer her friend. “I told you I needed to bitch about a man.”

Jayne leaned against the counter and studied her. “Yes you did, what you did not tell me was which man.” She tilted her head. “Nor did you tell me he made you cry. What happened and who is the guy?”

She had always been able to tell Jayne anything but, strangely, Megan found she was reluctant to tell her what exactly had happened. It was ridiculous but in the back of her mind was a little voice saying *what if...* “Did I tell you I was almost run over last night?” She knew it was a pathetic attempt at stalling. Jayne had known her too long to fall for it.

“No, you never mentioned that either and I would like to hear it, but first I want to hear about the man. Stop trying to change the subject.”

Megan opened her mouth to tell her it was part of the subject before deciding to start at the beginning. Finally she said, “I met him at work.” Guiltily, she glanced at the kitchen table and heat crept up her cheeks. Jayne’s eyebrows lifted, she picked up the bottle of wine she had brought in one hand and the two wineglasses in the other and shepherded Megan into the living room. Megan turned on a CD and sat on one end of the couch while Jayne shoved the coffee table out of the way and sprawled on the floor, leaning her elbow on the other end.

“Tell me,” she said, simply.

“I do not think I will ever be able to sit at your kitchen table to eat again!” They both looked towards the item of furniture in question then at each other and dissolved into laughter.

"You are just jealous," Megan stated as she reached for the half-full bottle of wine and filled both glasses.

"You bet I am. I swear to god, Meg, if you have found a real live shapeshifter, you will have to fight me for him. You'd probably win, too. It's been so long since I dated that I've forgotten how." Jayne lifted her wineglass and saluted her with it.

Megan shook her head, ignoring the dating comment. Jayne knew her feelings on the subject and this was not the time to fight about it again. Jayne could have her pick of men. It used to be a challenge to find a night when she wasn't out. "Come on, Jayne, this is not one of the paranormal romances you like to surround yourself with."

"Hey!" Jayne interrupted, "You read them too!"

"All right, okay, but this is real life and people do not turn into animals. Jack really seems to believe what he's saying and I just don't know what to do about it."

Jayne looked at her. "Has he hurt you?" Her eyes promised retribution at the mere thought.

"No. Well, not physically."

"Face it, he hasn't really hurt your feelings either. You're mostly angry at yourself for sleeping with a near stranger."

Megan considered that for a moment in silence before stating softly, "That's it, though...he doesn't feel like a stranger. I feel as if I know him. It's really bizarre, Jayne." She watched the knowing smile appear on her friend's face. "Not in a warm, fluffy way," she preempted. *Definitely too many romances.* "I'm not talking star-crossed lovers here. More like... Oh! I don't know but it does not feel like we just met."

Reading the message loud and clear, Jayne laughed quietly and changed the subject. "Do you think he is dangerous?"

"No. I don't know why I believe that, but I do."

"Well then, you have three choices. Never see him again, see him and put up with this little quirk in his personality..."

"Quirk!" Megan exclaimed.

"Yes, quirk, like you talking to yourself all the time."

"Everyone talks to themselves," Megan said defensively.

"Yes but not everyone has whole conversations," Jayne stated calmly.

"Okay, what's number three?"

Jayne took a sip of wine before meeting Megan's gaze. "Believe him."

Megan stared at Jayne for a moment while her words seemed to echo in her head. "What do you mean, 'believe him'?" she exclaimed.

Jayne moved to the couch beside her. "He could be telling you the truth."

"Jayne, if there were real shapeshifters, don't you think someone would have told the rest of the world by now?" Megan smiled and voiced her earlier thought, "You are clearly reading far too many of those books."

Jayne dipped the tip of her finger into her wine and ran it around the rim of her wineglass, drawing forth a clear tone. "I just want to believe in the magic. Meg, you're being given the chance to do that. Aren't you the one who is always complaining that nothing exciting ever happens to you?"

"Yes, but..." Megan broke off, shaking her head.

"He's offered to prove it to you, Megan. What are you going to do if he does?"

That was a question Megan was not ready to answer. She looked at her friend's serious expression and said flippantly, "Then I suppose I'd better buy a cat flap."

Jayne studied her briefly then accepted the subject change, her lips quirked. "From what you told me about last night... I think you already have one!" Both women laughed uproariously.

"Jayne! Oh God, that's disgusting!"

* * * * *

Frustrated, Jack paced the floor of his suite and tried to think what could possibly have gone wrong. *Megan had thrown him out!* This was not the reaction he had expected the first time he told someone that he was a shapeshifter. It was a secret he had never shared with anyone before and a tremendous risk, and now she wanted proof. Although it had always been part of his life, he had never really had to deal with the mating and transforming part of his heritage before. Up until now he had just been able to enjoy the benefits like his enhanced senses, speed and stamina. So far nothing was going as he had planned.

Megan filled his thoughts in a way that was unfamiliar to him and although he wanted to put his trust in her, he was still afraid of her reaction when she saw him change. She might be his Dearbh Ceangal but at the moment she just thought he was a lunatic. What would she think of him then? It really made no difference whether he told her now or later anyway because once they were mated, she couldn't help but find out. Maybe this would give her some time to get used to it. Then again, perhaps she would run as far and fast as she could and he would spend the rest of a very short life as a cat.

Jack suddenly wanted nothing more than to talk to his family. Unfortunately, his parents really were on vacation. Every year they retreated to their mountain cabin and it didn't have a phone—they relied on a friend in a nearby town for contact in an emergency. The cabin was one of his father's favorite places for that very reason. Head of a major computer software company, he enjoyed getting away from the ringing phones. Another reason he loved the cabin so much was that he could shift whenever he felt like it—as Jack had recently discovered for himself, it was not easy for a huge cat to go undetected in a town or city. He knew there was little his parents enjoyed more than running together in the surrounding woods.

Then there was his gregarious brother, Nick, who embraced his animal side. Nick had been one of the few people who understood his determination to find his true mate and Jack missed his support. He would never have gotten himself into this situation. Nick was more the kind to take what he wanted and answer questions later. Jack had

always warned his younger brother that his approach would get him into trouble. *A year is too long to be out of contact with your family.* Nick had come here to Scotland a year ago to bring some new computer software to Cameron Murray, a family friend. It could just as easily have been couriered but Nick, being Nick, had decided he would deliver it personally. He had joked that it was time someone prodded the reclusive Cam into leaving the house again and tried to badger the man into picking him up from the airport. Their friend had dug his heels in and refused, telling Nick that if he was so desperate to see Scotland he could rent a car and drive.

Nick had never arrived.

Jack pushed away the worry that tried to surface when he thought of his absent sibling. Nick was alive, he would feel it if he wasn't. Jack was going to pound him into the ground when he finally appeared. He shook his head and returned his thoughts to the present. He would give Megan until tomorrow, and after that she had better get used to his presence because he wasn't leaving her side until he could prove his case.

Chapter Five

Jack was surprised to find the blinds on Megan's windows were closed when he looked up at her apartment. He had the impression that she usually woke early. He had waited as long as he could stand before leaving the hotel, hoping to give her some time to cool down. He couldn't remember whether they had shared their dreams last night, but given his state of arousal this morning, he could only assume that they had. As he stood on the sidewalk, he became aware once more of the prickling feeling that told him he was being watched. It had happened a few times over the last couple of days and he wondered if he really did have a rival. *Paranoia...* Cautiously he glanced back at the windows above, assuring himself that all was clear, and headed into the building.

A few minutes later Jack was still standing outside her apartment door. He had knocked twice and received no answer. She was definitely there, he could feel her presence. It was possible that Megan was just ignoring him but there was no way he was leaving without making sure she was okay. Kneeling on the rough doormat, he called in her letterbox. "Megan, I know you're in there. Are you okay? Answer the door." Along the hall a neighbor's door opened a crack. "I'm not leaving until you open the door." Getting to his feet, he raised his hand to knock again, but the door flew open and Megan stood before him.

"What the hell are you doing?" she hissed.

"Hello to you, too." Jack replied wryly. He wasn't sure whether to laugh or hug her as the teddy bear on the front of her nightshirt suggested. Her curly hair was standing on end all over her head. She was pale as a ghost, had dark circles under bloodshot eyes and she was fuming. If the look on her face hadn't told him so, then her accent would have. He wondered fleetingly if she was aware that the more angry she was, the more Scottish she sounded. It probably wasn't the best time to ask.

"Can't I die in peace?" She glared at him. "Never mind...just come in," she said wearily and shuffled away, her knee-length bed socks falling to her ankles. "And don't slam the door!"

Jack followed her down the hall and found her perched on the couch in the dim living room with her head in her hands and her elbows resting on her knees. A rush of emotions filled him. They pushed out the brief flare of amusement and made him catch his breath at the intensity. He wanted to protect her, comfort and soothe her, then throw her onto the couch and take her. Instead he merely sat beside her. Her hair had tumbled forward to cover her face, leaving the nape of her neck bare and tempting him to press a kiss to the vulnerable skin. Taking his life in his hands, he asked carefully, "Hangover?"

She raised her head enough to glare at him. "What do you want, Jack?"

"I told you I would be back." He couldn't resist stroking a finger down her pale cheek. "Why don't you go take a shower and I'll make some coffee. I'll even try to find you some aspirin."

Megan stood resignedly and ran a hand through her hair. "All right, I have some questions for you anyway." He watched her walk away, confused by her easy acceptance. She paused at the door and looked back at him. "Cupboard above the coffee machine."

"Huh?"

"The aspirin." The door closed behind her with a click.

Megan wiped off the steam and looked at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. "I cannot believe I answered the door looking like this." Her head was still splitting but at least the nausea was fading. She and Jayne had finished the bottle of wine between them and then moved on to her bottle of apricot brandy. Their serious conversation had dissolved into innuendo and laughter and it had been very late when Jayne caught a cab home.

Megan had stumbled to bed with the room revolving around her and thought about Jayne's words while she waited for sleep to claim her. In the end she had decided that if Jack showed up again it wouldn't do any harm to listen to what he had to say. She had also realized that there were a lot of questions she wanted to ask him, she just hadn't expected to be hungover when he appeared. Smiling, she stripped off her nightgown and socks and wondered how he would have reacted if he had known she had nothing on underneath. *Why can't I control my hormones around the man?* She stuck her hand into the shower to test the temperature and stepped under the hot water with a groan of pleasure.

When Megan walked into the kitchen a while later, her hair was still damp but she was a little more presentable in jeans with an oversize white shirt. Jack sat at the table with a cup of coffee. At the opposite place, buttered toast, hot coffee and two headache pills waited. She sighed and sat down. Neither of them spoke while she finished the toast and took the pills. Jack looked as good as ever. *Doesn't the man ever get messed up?* His well-worn jeans hugged his body and he had on another polo shirt, this one pale gray. Before she could ask, he got up to refill their cups, then sat back down and gave her his attention again. Megan sipped the coffee, wondering where to start.

"So tell me, Jack, how did you become a shapeshifter?"

He looked at her warily. "I didn't actually 'become' a shapeshifter. I was born one. My whole family are shapeshifters."

She tilted her head. "Do you all turn into different animals?"

"No, just cats, but not all the same type." Jack met her eyes, his expression grave.

"How did that happen? Are you all under a curse... Did one of your ancestors get on the bad side of a witch?" she said, playing along. "Oh! Are you from..." she glanced towards the ceiling, "...up there?"

Jack sighed and shook his head. "Honey, if you're not going to take it seriously, there is no point in doing this now."

"I'm sorry, Jack, but you have to admit this is a little hard to believe."

"I know and I'm living it. No, we are not aliens, we are as human as you are... We just have the ability to change shape. We actually come from Britain originally, although we were more common in Scotland. There are shapeshifters all over the world now." He paused a moment, his expression thoughtful. "How do you feel about psychics?"

Megan regarded him with suspicion wondering where this was leading. "Okay, I know that there are some con artists out there but I think there are some who are genuine."

"Psychics are people who have mental abilities they can't explain and you don't think they are aliens."

She couldn't argue with that but in her mind there was still a big difference between shapeshifters and fortune tellers. "If there were shapeshifters all over the world, I should have heard something by now. Unless you are all living in the back of beyond – which you're clearly not."

"You have, you just didn't know it. Haven't you ever seen stories in magazines or newspapers about sightings of big cats? The most well-known is probably the Beast of Bodmin Moor."

Yes she had, come to think of it. She had to admit, his arguments were very convincing. *Okay, so it's a well-researched psychosis.* "That was you guys? And I thought we just had really incompetent zoos," she said flippantly. "So how often do you transform? Is there something that triggers it?"

"I told you before, the change comes when it comes. There is no pattern to it."

"Then it can happen any time? That must be inconvenient, particularly when you were a child. Growing up is hard enough without worrying if you are going to turn into a cat in the middle of classes."

Jack watched her. She was getting too close to the things he didn't want to discuss yet. He would have to tread carefully. "We only shift once in puberty, it's triggered by

all the hormonal changes in the body at that time. Regular shifting doesn't start until later in life."

"Really? Wow, and I thought I had hormone troubles to look forward to." She flashed him a quick smile. "When did you change the first time, as an adult I mean?"

"Very recently." Jack felt his cheeks and the tips of his ears grow warm, and lowered his head to stare into his mug of coffee. Embarrassing as it might be, it was easier to let her believe her assumption. He didn't want to lie to her any more than he already had, but until he had convinced her he was a shapeshifter, she would never believe she was his mate. He ignored the devil on his shoulder that urged him to just get it over with and tell her everything now. One world-changing revelation at a time was definitely the best way to go.

"I have to admit that I am *maybe* a little less skeptical, Jack, but my mind just doesn't want to accept this. I'm afraid seeing is believing."

He lifted his head and studied her face. He was relieved that she had let the subject of his first change go so easily, but she still didn't believe him. Letting his gaze caress her face, he said, "I am going to prove it to you, Megan, I just hope you are ready for it when I do. In the meantime, I will be staying very close to you."

Megan swallowed, her throat suddenly dry, and whispered, "How close?"

Jack stood and moved around the table to crouch between her knees, his voice deepened. "As close as I can get. You could even say I'm going to be a part of you." His hand lifted to sift through the hair at her temple. "You smell like strawberries today," he said softly. "You always smell so good."

Megan's heart fluttered at the hunger in his voice and her nipples peaked under her shirt as desire washed through her. She ran her fingers over his smooth cheek, drawing his attention back to her face. Their bodies were just inches apart, she could feel his warm, coffee-scented breath brush her lips and felt a trickle of moisture between her legs. Jack's nostrils flared and his pupils dilated and she somehow knew he could smell her arousal. When his hands clenched where they rested on his thighs but he made no

move to touch her, she realized that this time it was up to her. The knowledge went through Megan's body like lightning. She fisted her hands in his hair and crushed her mouth to his, her heart pounding in her ears. When he opened his lips for her, she slipped her tongue inside to duel with his. His palms were warm under her shirt where they rested at the base of her spine.

"Yoo-hoo, Megandear!" The voice registered gradually in Megan's foggy brain followed by the tapping at the door. Jack groaned in frustration as she pulled away to rest her forehead on his. They were both breathless. Glancing down she saw Jack's cock pressing impatiently against his fly and her fingers itched with the need to touch it. Jack must have read the intention in her face for a strong tremor ran through his body. "Do not answer it," he growled.

"I have to, it's my neighbor. She probably knows I'm here."

Jack recalled the open door when he had stood in the hallway. "Make that definitely," he said, she looked at him and he shrugged. "She saw me in the hall."

This time it was Megan who groaned. "You have no idea what you have just done." She pushed Jack's shoulders causing him to lose his balance and land on his butt with a startled "Hey!" then stood and headed towards the door. "But you are about to find out." Jack sat on the floor for a moment trying to bring his aching body back under control before getting slowly to his feet and following his mate. He paused halfway down the hall when she opened the door.

"There you are, Megandear, I was beginning to get worried about you!" The elderly woman who stood before Megan was certainly...eye-catching. She wore a yellow and orange striped top with purple polka dot cycling shorts. On her feet were a pair of yellow flip-flops with two-inch soles and large sunflowers stuck onto the straps. Her wispy silver hair was floating around her shoulders and there was a large pair of spangly purple sunglasses on her face. He was sure he heard his jaw hit the floor. He looked on fascinated as Megan blushed becomingly.

"I'm sorry to have worried you, Mrs. Timms. I'm fine, I just didn't hear the door."

"George and I are going to the beach, Megandarling, and I was just wondering if you had a picnic hamper we could borrow. I seem to have misplaced mine."

"No I don't, I'm s—" Mrs. Timms didn't wait for the reply as her gaze shifted down the hall and landed on Jack. "Oh! This must be your young man!" Jack smiled and approached the two women, struggling not to laugh at the whole situation. "Mrs. Timms, this is Jack Douglass...a friend." Her blue eyes dared him to contradict her as he reached to shake her neighbor's hand.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am."

Mrs. Timms' hand fluttered to her chest. "Oh! You're an American, Mr. Douglass!"

"Yes, ma'am, and please call me Jack."

"How lovely! George and I had an American staying with us for a while during the war." She glanced at the empty hallway to her left. "Didn't we, dear?"

Puzzled, Jack looked at Megan who shook her head imperceptibly.

"He was such a nice young man, very good company. George didn't really spend much time with him, did you dear? He was always at work, he works for the government, you know." She looked Jack up and down. "You Americans are all so...big." Jack heard Megan gasp and struggled not to laugh as Mrs. Timms continued brightly. "What are you doing in Scotland, Jack?"

He gave her the same answer he had given Megan. "I'm here on family business."

"Really? What business is your family in?"

"Computers. My father's company makes software. Mine makes the computers." He saw the surprise on Megan's face before Mrs. Timms spoke again.

"Oh! Do you know the Internet? I just love it, you can get such interesting pictures on there!"

Megan interrupted desperately, "Mrs. Timms, you had better go before the beach gets too busy."

"My, my! Yes, you are right! Let's go, Georgedear." She turned and took a few steps down the hall before stopping abruptly. "Oh Megandear! I almost forgot, I told Miss Appleton downstairs that I would ask if you had seen a stray dog around. She says she saw a big black dog on her fire escape!" she laughed. "I promised I would ask but it was probably her imagination. You know I think she is a little touched, poor dear..."

There was so much in that statement that Megan was clearly not sure what to react to first. Jack resolved to take more care in the future. "Ah, no... I definitely have not seen any dogs."

"All right, Megandarling, I'll see you later. You too, Jackdear. Cheerio!"

Megan shut the door and turned to face him. "Mrs. Timms is a little... Okay, who am I kidding? The woman is more than a few sandwiches short of a picnic."

"So I gathered," he chuckled. "Who's George?"

"I'll explain later." She looped her arms around his waist so that every inch of her body was touching him, bringing his body to full alert.

"Now, where were we?" she murmured.

He laughed softly and returned her embrace. "I believe we were about to take part in another one of those kitchen table sex scenes."

Blue eyes met silver. Megan smiled. "Maybe I should invest in a stronger table."

"Maybe you should. Do you think we will ever make it to bed?" In answer, she slipped her hand into his and led him down the hall to the bedroom.

Jack stopped just inside the door, folded his arms to prevent himself from reaching for her and leaned one hip negligently against the doorframe.

She stood at the foot of the bed, her eyes scorching him. "What are you doing, Jack? Come here." She reached her hand out to him, her voice husky with desire.

Jack shook his head, keeping his face impassive as his body ached to be inside her. This time he wanted to take her slowly. Make her scream his name. He knew she was

wet for him, the scent of her desire tormented him. "Take your clothes off for me, Megan, I need to see you."

Surprise lit her eyes briefly but her hands were already moving towards the buttons of her shirt. She fixed her gaze to his face and unfastened it slowly from top to bottom. She lifted one shoulder then the other and let the white top slide down her arms to pool on the floor at her feet. Her hands lifted to cover her breasts coyly before sliding slowly down to the waistband of her jeans. The rasp of her zipper was loud in the silence of the room and in a moment she stood before him in a white lace bra and high-cut panties. Her hair spilled over her shoulders in stark contrast to her creamy skin. Berry-red nipples were peaking against the sheer, lacy cups, and he glimpsed the silken curls between her thighs.

"Touch me," she whispered.

Jack felt a bead of sweat roll slowly down his back when her tongue moistened her lips. This was his mate. No longer able to tolerate the distance between them, he crossed the room and walked slowly around her, caressing her with his eyes before pausing in front of her. But he didn't touch her. Not yet. "Take them off."

She raised a brow but said nothing. His hard-on throbbed insistently against the fly of his jeans as she obeyed him. "Lie on the bed."

Obediently she crawled onto the white duvet, her curvy ass swaying seductively, pausing to give him a heat-filled glance that told him she knew exactly what she was doing to him. She reclined against the soft pillows, one hand resting low on her belly, legs parted just enough to tease him. Reminding him of the night he had watched her pleasure herself.

As if she had read his thoughts her hand slipped down and she caressed herself gently, just barely touching her mound. His body surged with excitement. It took all his restraint to strip slowly when every nerve ending screamed at him to rip off his clothes and plunge into her. With hands that trembled, he sheathed his rigid erection in a condom and knelt between her thighs. Placing his hands on either side of her, he bent

and kissed her with a slow carnality, thrusting his tongue into her mouth with deep leisurely strokes, a portent of what was to come.

Megan reached out for him and he stilled abruptly. "Ah, ah...hands off." He waited until she gripped the duvet, he didn't know if he could last if she touched him. When he raised his head he saw that her cheeks were flushed and her breathing had quickened. He lowered his head again this time to her breasts, drawing first one, then the other into his mouth, rolling her sensitive nipples between his lips before suckling them until she moaned with pleasure and began to move restlessly. He paused and lifted his head. "I've been meaning to ask you something..."

"Now!?" she demanded, incredulously.

Jack nuzzled the soft curve of her belly, ignoring her. "Why is it that your accent is so easy for me to understand?" He dipped his tongue in her navel and she gasped.

"Ah! I've, uh, worked in the restaurant for ten years."

"And?"

"We get a lot of tourists." She moaned as he traced the tips of his fingers along her sides. "I've-learned-to-slow-down-and-speak-clearly." Jack chuckled at the rush of words and slid further down her body.

"Jack." She whimpered in protest when he kissed his way towards his ultimate goal. She had stopped him from making her come this way before. "Not this time, honey... This time I intend to finish what I started." He brushed a kiss across the crown of her sex before running the tip of his tongue lightly along the seam of her labia from top to bottom and back. She moaned and tilted her hips as he parted her and swirled his way around her swollen clitoris, sucking gently on it. Her body trembled under his hands. The taste of her inflamed him, causing his own hips to buck against the bed in search of relief.

He grasped the smooth cheeks of her ass and raised her hips, pushing his tongue inside her, thrusting in and out in a sensual mimicry of what his body cried out for. Her hands gripped his head this time, holding him to her instead of pushing him away as

she lost herself in the sensations. He felt her inner walls begin to spasm and clench around his tongue, her breath coming in gasps.

“Oh God, Jack!” Megan cried out, her head tossing on the pillows, body arching off the bed. He gripped her hips and held her in place as a rush of hot fluid filled his mouth and bathed his chin.

She collapsed back onto the mattress panting softly, her lashes dark against pink flushed cheeks. Jack thought he had never seen a more beautiful sight. He licked his lips clean as he trailed the length of his body up along the length of hers until his marble-hard penis rested against her damp heat. “Let me come inside you,” he murmured and kissed her deeply, sucking her tongue into his mouth, letting her taste the salty sweetness of her own release.

It felt like every muscle in his body was drawn tight in anticipation. He could feel Megan’s heart pounding hard within her chest as it rose and fell beneath his, his cock pulsed with the rapid beat of his own heart. Slumberous blue eyes locked with hungry silver while he slowly penetrated her and sweat beaded on his brow as he resisted the urge to take his own pleasure quickly. Megan wrapped her legs around his hips and gripped his shoulders, pressing her face to his neck and breathing deeply of his scent.

She nipped his earlobe and whispered, “Please...please....”

Blood rushed in his ears, all of his senses focused on the hot clasp of her body around his cock as he moved. He felt the tension in her as he built her up towards the peak once more, muscles tightening, hips rising off the bed to meet his. Her nails dug into his back, panting breaths becoming desperate moans with every thrust.

He felt her come, her body clenching tightly around him as she threw back her head and screamed. Tremors shook him and sweat rolled down his back, his own release approaching with the speed and power of a freight train. His buttocks and thighs grew taut with need. With an animalistic growl, he gave in to his body’s demands, pistoning his hips faster and harder until he followed her in a burst of heat and light.

Chapter Six

Megan lay in Jack's embrace, her head resting on his chest watching the afternoon light filter through her bedroom window and listening to the slow beat of his heart. Heat radiated from his body and his chest rose and fell silently. He was fast asleep, unfortunately, Megan couldn't say the same. She could not believe she had given in to the desire between them again—for someone who was usually very cautious about sex, she didn't seem to have any trouble throwing herself at Jack. Their discussion earlier had made one thing clear to her, that he believed absolutely in his story and he was not going to go away until he had her convinced, too.

That was another thing...why was he so desperate to make her believe? After all, they had only met a few days ago, they didn't have what you could call a relationship and yet he was determined to tell her this secret. She had a feeling there was something else he wasn't telling her, but what could be worse than being a part-time cat? It gave her a headache to think about it. In the meantime, her independent streak was emerging again, now that her thoughts weren't clouded by lust.

Megan didn't like to be forced into anything, she had been taking care of herself for a long time and if Jack thought he could force himself into her life he was very much mistaken. Time to pull herself together and try to beat this...irrational attraction, it was frightening the way it always seemed to push everything else out of her head.

She needed her own space and it didn't look like he was going to give it to her. With that in mind, she eased herself out of his arms, freezing when he stirred, only daring to breathe when he settled onto his stomach. Silently she crept from the room.

In the kitchen she dressed quickly in wrinkled clothes from the clean laundry basket, glad for once that she had shoved it in the cupboard until she could be bothered to sort everything. She glanced longingly at the fresh hot coffee in the pot then pulled a

plastic grocery bag from the recycle drawer, wincing at the noise, and filled it with clothes as well. Amazed she had gotten this far without Jack hearing her, she retrieved her shoes and bag from the living room and wrote a quick note on the message pad on the coffee table.

When she glanced into the bedroom on her way down the hall, she saw that Jack was stirring restlessly and had thrown the covers off. He was gloriously naked, the soft white of the sheets emphasizing his rich gold skin and midnight black hair. His cock nestled between his thighs, almost as impressive flaccid as it was erect. There was a dull flush of red along his cheekbones and as she watched he grimaced as if in the grip of a nightmare. Second thoughts assailed her but she pushed them ruthlessly aside and turned away—it was only for a few days. At the end of the hall, she took the door key from the hook on the wall and let herself out of the flat closing the door gently behind her.

Jack woke abruptly, confused for a moment by his surroundings, knowing something had disturbed him but not sure exactly what. He glanced around the room and memory returned in a rush. *Megan*. He glanced at the bed beside him, finding it empty. There was no sound from the bathroom and he felt her presence nearby so he assumed she must be in the living room, probably drinking the coffee he could smell. Although why she would want to drink coffee when the apartment was so damn hot was beyond him. He swiped at the bead of sweat that trickled down his jawline. His thoughts trailed to a halt as he finally took stock of his body to find that it wasn't the apartment that was hot—the sheets he lay on were cool on his skin—it was him.

Jack sat up and a tremor of apprehension washed over him. This was it, Megan was about to find out that he was telling the truth. Still, he didn't move and he was disgusted at himself for his weakness until finally the onset of the itching in his skin spurred him on. As he headed for the front room he realized that it wasn't just the bathroom that was silent, it was the whole apartment—the living room and kitchen

were both empty when he entered them. The paper on the table caught his attention and he stopped his search to scan it.

Jack,

Had to go away for a few days, need some space to think. The door will lock again when you close it behind you. I'll give you a call at the hotel when I get back.

Megan

Scratching furiously now, he reached for the link with his mate only to feel her presence in his mind rapidly become fainter. He knew then that it had been the sound of the front door that had awakened him. He raced to the window and saw her car pulling away from the front of the building. *She was leaving!* Anger bubbled through him. If Megan thought he was going to sit around and wait for her to get in touch, she was very much mistaken. Heedless of his nudity and the ache of his joints he started for the front door, thinking only of catching up with her. He made it as far as the hall before the change swept through him. The pain of it doubled him over and forced him to the floor, the snarl that escaped his throat more feline than human.

When it was over he lay on his side panting, his tail twitching with agitation. *Why now?* He rolled fluidly to his paws and stalked to the door. There would be no exit through there. He glared at the small round doorknob with a heat that should have melted the metal. In his present form there was no way he would be able to turn it to open the door—his paws were too big and he wouldn't be able to grip the smooth metal with his teeth either. Besides even if he did manage to turn it, as high as it was he'd have to lean his front paws against the door to reach it, meaning he would not be able to pull the door open.

Growling in frustration he prowled through the rooms checking the bedroom window and the living room windows to find they too were shut tight. He began to pace up and down in front of the window as he fought the cat's desire to break out of its

confinement and go after his mate. There was absolutely no doubt in his mind that Megan would not appreciate him smashing her window. It would attract too much attention anyway, so he put it to the back of his mind as a last resort. Anger surfaced as he acknowledged he was trapped in the apartment until he changed back, and he had no idea how long that would be.

* * * * *

Two hours. Two damn hours he had prowled Megan's apartment while the frustration and anger of the cat had pummeled him until he had thought he'd go mad. They mingled with and heightened his own irritation making it difficult to fight against his animal instincts. So he found himself slipping into its behaviorisms again and again. He had to complete the bond with Megan soon, before he lost himself completely.

The rain that now soaked his clothes as he stood outside the apartment had started an hour ago and had almost been the final straw. It obliterated any scent trail he might have followed. All he could do was check places she might have gone, starting with the most likely – her closest friend. As the rain began to trickle down his neck he pulled out his compact cell phone and called a cab. Jayne Davis lived on the other side of town and he was in no mood for any further delays.

Within half an hour he was standing in front of another small apartment building. Satisfaction and relief filled him along with the knowledge that she was here, that she couldn't hide from him. *Not that she knows that*, he thought with a twinge of guilt. The rain was heavier now, storm clouds bringing darkness early and cooling the August day so that he shivered slightly. He ignored it though and stood in the deserted street as his mind and senses were filled with her, causing his cock to harden with anticipation.

He never even saw the attack coming.

There was a moment of hot burning pain in his left side before the two men wearing woolen masks pinned him against the wall. One held a switchblade in front of

his face while the other tried to pull his wallet from his pocket. They said nothing, but when he looked into the cold eyes of the one with the knife he knew that they meant to kill him. They were both as tall as he was and thickly muscled, and had he not been what he was they could have held him easily. With a growl of rage, Jack twisted his wrists from their grip, causing both men to stumble back with gasps of surprise. Low snarls rumbled in his chest as he took a step towards them. The two exchanged a terror-filled glance at the inhuman noise and fled. As Jack started to follow, fiery pain spread through his abdomen and he sank onto the wet pavement.

For an instant he thought he was going to change again. Then he saw the spreading stain on his pale shirt and realized it wasn't just rainwater he could feel trickling down his side, soaking the waistband of his jeans. He touched his fingertips to the wet fabric, gleaming black in the orange streetlights.

Blood.

He needed to move, he couldn't just sit here in the street waiting for his attackers to come back. Worse, a passerby might come along and call an ambulance and there was no way he could be admitted to hospital. Besides the fact that his body healed abnormally quickly, there was just too much danger of him shapeshifting. Grimly he struggled to his feet, gritting his teeth against the pain as he clutched his side and made his way into the building.

By the time he had climbed the two flights of stairs that led to Miss Davis' apartment he was pale, sweating and exhausted. He knocked on the door then leaned against the wall beside it, fighting the desire to slide down it to rest on the floor. *It's just a flesh wound, Jack. If this was the movies you would have chased down the bad guys then run up those stairs.* His lips quirked in grim humor at the thought. He heard the lock turn and he pushed off the wall to face the door as it opened.

How did he find me? He heard the startled exclamation and saw the surprise on Megan's face, before she started to slam it closed again. Moving more quickly than was wise, he stepped forward to block it. Agony shot through him and his vision grayed

around the edges. He moaned as he crumpled to the floor thinking ruefully that he seemed to be spending far too much time on the ground lately.

“Oh God, Jack, you’re bleeding! What happened?”

His side throbbed with the beat of his heart and he could feel the warm trickle of blood on his chilled skin. He looked at Megan’s shocked face as she knelt beside him and lifted his stained shirt. *Wonder what she would say if I asked her to do the blood exchange now? After all, why waste it?* Jack dismissed his idiotic musings and raised his head enough to look at his side. The wound was low on the left side of his abdomen just below his ribs, thin and about two inches long. Dark red blood seeped from it steadily, dripping down his side and onto the polished wood flooring. He picked up Megan’s thoughts easily as she realized that it was a knife wound.

“I had a little argument with a couple of guys downstairs. They thought they should have my wallet and I disagreed,” he said wryly. He had his suspicions about the incident but he wasn’t ready to share them yet. If he had the energy he would have kicked himself for not paying attention to his surroundings. So much for his enhanced senses.

She pulled a drying white T-shirt from the radiator on the wall behind her with trembling hands and pressed it firmly to the cut. Jack gritted his teeth against the hiss of pain that wanted to escape. “I need you to hold this in place while I call the police and an ambulance.”

He gripped her hand. “No. No police and definitely no hospital.”

She met his gaze. “What? Jack, you were mugged. You are bleeding all over Jayne’s floor!”

He tightened his grip. “Please, Megan. I told you what I am, I heal quickly. The guys will be long gone by now, so what good will calling the police do? I’ll be fine, it’s not as bad as it looks.” Grimacing, he sat up and took the makeshift bandage from her. “Look, the bleeding’s already slowed down.” Megan studied him for a moment,

concern and reluctance evident on her face, but she couldn't force him to go to the hospital.

Even in his present condition his body started to respond to her presence. It was ridiculous, wearing a pair of wrinkled gray sweatpants and an equally crumpled sweater, she wasn't exactly dressed to impress. The baggy clothes hid all of the enticing curves he knew she possessed. His mouth almost watered in anticipation of discovering them again. His fingers itched to pull the band from her hair and run his fingers through the riotous curls.

Oblivious to his wayward desires, Megan's business-like tone brought him back to earth with a bump. "Come on, let's at least get you out of this doorway before one of the neighbors see us. If you won't go to hospital, I want you here where I can make sure you are okay." She helped him to his feet.

In the living room Megan covered Jayne's couch with a few towels before handing him another. "Get out of those wet clothes and lie down," she ordered. Jack arched one black brow at her but wisely said nothing. Heat rushed to her face but she ignored it. After all the man was injured, she shouldn't be thinking about sex. Anyway, it wasn't as if she'd never seen him naked before. Hell, she had run her lips and tongue over most of that body just a few hours ago. When he eased out of his shirt she was relieved to see that the bleeding was definitely slowing. Her brow creased in puzzlement, in fact, the cut didn't look as bad as she had first thought. It still needed to be stitched, though. "Please, lie down. I'll get the first aid kit." Taking his wet clothes from him, she fled to the kitchen.

When she returned a few moments later, Jack's lean, sleekly muscled body was sprawled on the couch. He was still pressing the T-shirt to his side and had draped a towel across his hips hiding his burgeoning erection. *I am not disappointed*, Megan told herself firmly as she knelt on the floor beside him, but part of her hungered for that cock.

His short, coal-black hair had been soaked, but he had obviously dried it with one of the towels since the damp strands stuck up in spikes. It should have looked comical but instead it only added to the air of wildness that clung to him. This time when he peeled the T-shirt away she could see the bleeding had almost stopped and had begun to clot, sealing the cut. Jack said nothing when she started to gently clean the wound and his skin, but she could see the muscles in his jaw tighten and knew he was gritting his teeth against the sting of the antiseptic. "I can't believe this has happened, Jack. I mean, this isn't paradise, there are occasional bag snatches but I have never heard of anyone being assaulted with a weapon during a robbery. Especially not in this part of town... This is a good area."

"There's a first time for everything," he replied, his voice betraying none of what he might be feeling.

Finished cleaning the cut, she applied some butterfly strips to close the edges. Blood still oozed slightly from it but it wasn't actively bleeding anymore. Jack had been telling the truth when he said he healed quickly. The implications of that made her slightly uneasy. "I suppose so... I still think we should call the police and report this. I know they won't be able to do much for you but they should know in case these men go after someone else." He didn't answer and she sighed in frustration and looked at him. "Jack." His molten eyes pinned her for endless seconds before he finally spoke. "No."

A trickle of sweat rolled down his impassive face, catching her attention. She followed its path down to his hair-dusted chest and frowned as it was followed a wave of goose bumps.

"Are you all right, Jack?" When she looked at his face again, it was a little flushed and his gaze seemed to be focused inward. "Jack?" *I knew I should've just called an ambulance... God, what if he's got internal injuries...*

She started to get to her feet, gasping in surprise when Jack's hand shot out and grabbed her wrist. A shiver ran down her spine when she noticed he was scratching his

neck and chest with his other hand. His words of the other day echoed in her head. *"The scratching was a sign that the change was coming..."*

"You are about to get your proof, Megan." His low voice startled her and she dragged her eyes back to his face. He released her wrist and Megan backed away a couple of steps while he climbed slowly to his feet, shedding the towel to stand naked before her.

"He's offered to prove it to you, Megan. What are you going to do if he does?" "Shut up, Jayne," she whispered under her breath. He was shivering now, and his chest rose and fell as his breathing sped up and he pressed his hands to his stomach and hunched over.

"Jack, talk to me, tell me what's happening. You're scaring me a little here."

His skin seemed to ripple and darken and as thick black fur pushed through his pores, he spoke to her through gritted teeth. "Please, don't be afraid, Megan. I won't hurt you." His voice was guttural, almost unrecognizable, his eyes glowed with an inner fire and intensity and he reached out to her with a clawed hand.

Megan let out a startled shriek and clapped a trembling hand to her mouth. Frozen to the spot, she couldn't have moved even had she wanted to, her chest rose and fell rapidly with shallow panicked breaths. Fascinated and horrified, she watched his fur-covered ears change shape and move towards the top of his head. Jack groaned as his face and jaw thrust forward to accommodate razor-sharp teeth and she saw a tail curl itself around him. The groan changed to a low rumbling growl as the transformation swept down the length of his body. His entire frame was reshaping itself so brutally she expected to hear the bones snapping but the only sounds were Jack's panting breaths and growls of pain.

Her heart tried to beat its way out of her chest as finally he fell forward onto all fours, feline head bowed low and his chest heaving. Megan dropped to her knees like a puppet with its strings cut. Standing before her was the huge cat that had spent the

night in her apartment, just as Jack had tried to tell her. His hair was the same midnight black as Jack's and he looked at her with Jack's quicksilver eyes.

Holy crap! She rubbed her hands over her face.

"Oh my God! Jack?" She whispered tremulously, "Is that you?" The cat—*Jack*—raised his head and...nodded!

"Oh my God! I can't believe I just...you just..." Reassured by the very human response, she crawled over to him on hands and knees and lifted a trembling hand to stroke his jaw.

"That was amazing and, and...terrifying, but..." She looked into his eyes. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you, Jack."

He rubbed his face against her palm. The gesture was so feline Megan's lips twitched into a reluctant smile. "Are you okay? It looked so painful." Suddenly she remembered his knife wound and ran her fingers down his side until she found the butterfly strips caught in his fur. She found the cut nearby and discovered though her fingertips came away spotted with blood, the cut was about half the size it had been. She raised her eyebrows in surprise when Jack nudged her out of the way to lick the wound clean. He obviously still understood her but twice now he had behaved like a cat... The ringing of Jayne's phone shattered the uneasy silence and interrupted her thoughts. Jack's body tensed at the noise, ears twitching he stared at the phone. Rising slowly, she answered it. When she glanced back, he had returned to his task.

Chapter Seven

Megan's phone conversation was only background noise as Jack struggled with the fact that he had actually shifted in front of his mate and she hadn't run screaming from him. After all the time he had spent agonizing over it, the reality was hard to accept. She had been afraid, certainly, but had trusted him enough to believe he would not do her any harm. The knowledge made his heart clench and sent a rush of warmth through his veins.

The crash as Megan slammed down the phone interrupted his thoughts and brought his head up. He realized with a shiver that the cat had taken over and had been busily tending its wound while he had been preoccupied. "That was Jayne calling from her cell phone. She'll be home soon...we have to get this mess cleaned up. She will flip when she sees her favorite T-shirt. I have to hide it!"

Jack cocked his head and watched her silently as she raced around the living room lifting the shirt, towels and first aid supplies. *I knew it had been too easy*, he thought wryly. She headed for the kitchen and he padded after her quietly, just in time to see her closing the door of the washing machine. He gave brief consideration to the fact that his clothes must be in there too, so he would have nothing to wear when he shifted back. She turned from the washing machine, her hand flying to her heart when she saw that he was standing behind her.

"You have to leave!" She was right. However reluctant he was, he couldn't let her friend see him like this. He felt the cat's determination to stay with her but before he even thought to fight it back she changed her mind. "No! You can't, there's only one way out of this apartment. She'll see you! You have to hide!" He watched from the living room doorway as she took some cloths to the hall and cleaned up the blood from

the floor before throwing those in the wash too. Her thoughts were muddled and confused but he knew that she felt guilty about something.

He doesn't need to know.

Okay, that was annoying. What good was the ability to read someone's thoughts if what you heard was so often only bits and pieces? Megan passed him again this time going from the hall into what he assumed was a bedroom.

"Come on, Jack!"

Tail twitching and eyes narrowed, he followed her, making a mental note to ask her later just what it was that he didn't need to know – unless he picked it up before then.

One step into the room and Jack froze. He hadn't taken much notice of Jayne's apartment so far other than to note that it was larger than Megan's and that the furniture was new rather than used as his mate's seemed to be. He couldn't help but notice this room, however. The cream-colored walls were lined with bookcases, most of which were filled with books. In the corner by the window was a plump two-seater sofa, a tall lamp was lit behind it and a small table stood beside it. Perfect for spending hours absorbed in a book.

Megan stood at the wall opposite the sofa, by the open door of a walk-in closet. It contained only a few boxes and some spare bedding and pillows high up on some shelves, nothing hung on the rails under them and the carpeted floor was clear. It took a moment for the implications of that open door to sink in – she expected him to hide in there! The cat snarled at her, with the natural resistance to captivity of any wild creature. Jack was aware that he had very little choice. He could not leave the apartment, not without letting Jayne – or worse, one of her neighbors – see him in his feline form. The decision was made for him when he heard the rattle of keys at the front door. He stalked reluctantly into the closet and Megan closed the door behind him. There was just enough room for him to turn around or stretch out on the floor.

Although it was dark, the small amount of light which seeped under the door and the exceptional night vision of the cat allowed him to see quite clearly. Not that there

was anything to see. The cat was not happy and Jack knew it was going to take a lot of energy to keep it contained and quiet. The change last time had only lasted a couple of hours and he hoped that would be the case this time, too.

The slight ache in his side reminded him of his wound and he shifted to ease it. The attack bothered him. It didn't seem like a random mugging. In his distracted state, they could easily have stolen his wallet and run before he could react. Sure he would have caught them easily, but they couldn't know that. Megan's comments about the unlikelihood of it happening only confirmed his suspicions. Those men had meant to kill him, but what he didn't know was why.

He cast his mind back to the events of the last few days and his anger rose as he remembered his sense that someone was watching them and then recalled the hit and run. The near-miss still had the power to scare him. At the time he had dismissed it as an accident, but what if it hadn't been? Rage, dark and ugly, filled him when he considered the possibility that someone could be trying to hurt his mate. While it wasn't impossible that something had been missed, his investigation of Megan had not revealed any enemies. It was more likely to be his fault. He had made his share of enemies in the past and what better way to get to him than to hurt someone he cared about? The only problem with that theory was that his enemies were more likely to try to kill his business than a person. Besides, why target Megan? They couldn't know how important she was to him. As far as anyone else knew, she was only a waitress he had just met.

Once back in his human form he was going to have to do some poking around, try to find out who could be after them and why. In the meantime, he would stick close to Megan and be vigilant. She was his and no one was going to take her from him.

He felt the cat's restlessness rise again, it growled softly and he shifted his focus back to the present. He was aware of Megan's chaotic thoughts and the muffled voices of the two women as they moved about the apartment. He listened intently to both to assure himself that all was well.

"Did you hear something?"

Megan jumped, nearly slicing her finger instead of the chicken breast. She looked at her friend and smiled. "Just my stomach."

Laughing, Jayne resumed chopping up the mixed vegetables. "Tell me about it, I didn't get time for lunch today and breakfast seems like a long time ago."

Megan tossed the poultry into the pan, grimacing at the cold slimy feel of it, and turned to wash her hands. She was just relieved to have avoided another one of the suspicious looks Jayne had been sending her way. She never could lie to her, her friend knew her far too well. She was having a difficult time keeping her mind on their conversation. All she could think about was the fact that Jack was an honest-to-goodness real-life shapeshifter. That, and the fact that he was, at this moment, hiding in Jayne's walk-in closet. She was bursting to tell her friend but she knew Jack wouldn't be happy. In fact he was not going to like it when he found out that she had already confided in Jayne.

Wouldn't like it... She shook her head ruefully. Furious is what he'd be. That was not really something she wanted to witness. Normally she was confident in her ability to handle men, but then there wasn't usually the danger of being eaten during the argument. If Jayne saw the cat she would know that it was him, at the moment she still thought he might be crazy and that was bad enough. Maybe once Jack got to know her... Well anyway, it wasn't her secret to tell and she felt guilty enough as it was. Instead she asked, "Tough day?"

"Oh, no worse than usual." Jayne added the vegetables and turned on the cooker. "What about you? You are awfully damn jumpy for a woman who spent all morning making love." She wiggled her eyebrows at Megan and turned back to the cooker. "I still think you're nuts for wanting to spend the night on my sofa bed instead of naked with a hot guy."

Megan began setting the table, breathing in the aroma of spices and cooking stir-fry appreciatively. "It seemed like a good idea at the time." *I wonder how good Jack's hearing*

is... "I needed to think and I can't seem to do that around him. It scares me how I can't seem to control myself around him." Jayne put the two plates on the table and while Megan poured two glasses of water, she thought of Jack cooped up in the cupboard. *Maybe I should take him a saucer of milk.* She chuckled and looked up to see Jayne giving her that suspicious look again. Time to change the subject. Knowing that it would be enough to start Jayne off, she said, "So, I take it you're still having trouble with your boss?"

The manager of the store where Jayne worked was a chauvinistic pig who thought he was irresistible to women everywhere. Needless to say, he and Jayne had been butting heads from the beginning. He went out of his way to make Jayne's life a misery. The conversation lasted the rest of the meal allowing Megan to relax a little.

They were cleaning up when Megan's calm was shattered by a loud thump from the direction of the spare room. Jayne's startled gaze flew towards the door before she sent a narrow-eyed look of inquiry to Megan and went to investigate. Heart in her throat, Megan followed.

Jayne headed straight for the cupboard door and quickly opened it. The breath Megan hadn't realized she was holding whooshed out when she saw Jack sitting on the floor with Jayne's spare duvet tucked under his arms. There was a sheen of sweat on his face and on the powerful shoulders that rose and fell as he visibly tried to calm his breathing. She read relief and embarrassment in his eyes.

"Hi." Jayne said brightly, "You must be Jack."

Jack looked at the two women standing in the open door as he struggled to his feet. The tall, slim redhead regarded him with curiosity and humor. She felt...familiar to him in some indefinable way. He dismissed the vague feeling. It was probably Megan's awareness he was feeling. Her green eyes drifted over his face and the breadth of his shoulders making him grateful for the duvet that he had managed to pull from the shelf earlier. "And you would be Jayne." He cleared the hoarseness from his throat. His body

felt heavy and clumsy and exhaustion descended on him as he walked wearily into the center of the room. He hadn't eaten since this morning and two changes and the loss of blood were taking their toll on him.

His mate, who had been uncharacteristically silent until now, hurried into an explanation. "Jack was...that is...we..."

Jayne looked from Megan's flushed face to him with laughing eyes. "I think I can guess what you were up to." She ignored Megan's half-hearted protest. "I would be too if he were mine."

"I got soaked on the way over here and Megan offered to take care of my clothes."

Jayne gave them a reproachful look. "And you were hiding in the cupboard because...?"

"Well...after all the fuss I made this morning, I didn't want you to know I'd given in so easily to him. So I asked him to hide until I could sneak him out."

Jack wanted to shake his head at Megan's weak excuse but he couldn't think of anything better himself. He watched both disbelief then suspicion cross Jayne's pretty face. "You are my best friend, Megan, so I'll let that go—for now. You must be hungry, Jack. There is some chicken left if you like. I'll leave you two lovebirds alone. I believe I hear a book calling my name."

The door closed behind her and they stared at each other in silence for several uncomfortable seconds. Jack approached Megan warily, cupping her chin in his hand. "Thank you." She frowned hard at him, brows drawing together in puzzlement. He still couldn't believe she was standing here with him, chose to stand here with him, knowing what he was.

"Thank you for trusting me. For lying to your friend. Thank you." Leaning forward he kissed her lips, demanding nothing in return. Her eyes drifted closed as he drew back, she shivered and he felt the soft puff of breath on his lips when she sighed softly. Jack's body stirred in response. To his surprise she rose on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his once more. The kiss was deep and hot and wet as they explored each other's

mouths. Heat surrounded them and he groaned low in his throat. Megan stilled instantly and broke away. Fingers pressed to her lips she gasped for breath. "Why don't you go take a shower, Jack, and I'll wait for you in the kitchen." She whirled away from him, leaving him hard and aching for her.

Why had she stopped? He stared sightlessly at his reflection in the dark window. The annoyingly weak part of him whispered that it was because she had suddenly come to her senses and realized what she was kissing. It hadn't been fear he had read in her eyes though, it had been determination. Mystified, Jack added yet another question to the list he had to ask her later.

Never in his life had he been as off-balance and confused, he had always been confident in himself and his abilities. Hell, he had worked his way to the top of his father's company on his own merits and now ran his own multinational company. He was grateful for the way he had been raised to believe he could accomplish anything he wanted. Aside from the fact that he was from a family of shapeshifters, his childhood had been disgustingly normal, maybe too normal. His parents still lived in the same house in the suburbs that he had grown up in—far enough from the city to be peaceful while still close enough for his dad to commute daily. They had money so he had wanted for nothing but there had been no cooks, cleaners or nannies. His mom had stayed home with him and Nick until they were at school then gone to work part-time in an antique store.

Though open about their heritage and what it would ultimately mean for their sons, his parents had tried to give them as normal a childhood as possible. As a result he knew he wasn't as accepting of his heritage as he could be and now he was beginning to realize just how unprepared it had left him. He could almost hear Nick's voice saying "I told you so". Where Jack had been happy to accept what his father taught them, his brother had actively sought out other shifters to find out as much as he could. Nick would no doubt find his self-assured, focused older brother's present situation highly amusing. Wearily Jack turned from the window and went in search of the shower.

Megan paced the kitchen floor restlessly. What was it about Jack that she couldn't seem to resist? One kiss and she had practically jumped on the man. Even now she was aware of parts of her body that she wasn't normally conscious of. Her nipples were peaked under the soft fabric of her T-shirt and bra. Her clitoris pulsed with every beat of her heart. She had already washed the few dishes that she and Jayne had used and put Jack's clothes in the dryer—she was running out of distractions. Down the hall the shower started and her imagination immediately provided her with an image of Jack naked. Hot water coursing over his golden skin and down his muscular torso, following the trail of dark hair over his flat stomach to... *Aaargh! No! No! No!* With a curse she turned on her heel to resume pacing and caught sight of the kitchen waste bin. It needed to be emptied, it wasn't her favorite job but it would definitely take her mind off of Jack. What could be less sexy than emptying a bin?

Pleased with her restraint but mind nevertheless still filled with fantasies about her naked shapeshifter, she carried the bag of rubbish down through the quiet building. The back of the flats—where the dumpster for the residents rubbish sat—was usually lit by a floodlight above the back door. The door had swung shut behind her before she noticed that the light was out. The night air was cool and damp from the earlier storm, and a few gardens away she could hear a dog barking furiously.

Feeling a bit like a character in a horror movie, she stood in the patch of yellow light that shone through the window in the door and stared into the inky blackness. She knew that the dumpster was only about twenty-feet away, she could just make out the outline of it as her eyes began to adjust. The hair rose on the back of her neck, reminding her that the characters who went off into the dark alone in horrors usually got killed first. *It's a good thing this isn't a horror movie then, isn't it?* Megan thought, with uneasy amusement. She weighed the bag of rubbish in her hand, took a slow breath to calm her jittery nerves and walked quickly to the large rubbish container. In one movement she tossed the bag into the top, turned, and dashed back towards the door.

About halfway across the yard she began to feel ridiculous and forced herself to slow to a walk despite the frantic racing of her heart. She reached for the handle of the door and a callused palm suddenly closed over her mouth, hauling her against a large, hard body. Her scream of fright was muffled as he swung around so that his back was to the wall by the door and she was facing the darkness. She began to struggle, kicking at his shins with her heels and thrusting her elbows back towards his stomach, trying to break the bruising grip he had on her mouth. Something sharp pricked the skin of her throat. A knife. Her eyes widened in fear and she tried again to shout.

"Be still!" he whispered harshly, and there was a sharp sting as he pressed the blade more firmly to her neck. Breathless from her exertions, Megan froze. She thought of Jack bleeding on Jayne's floor just a few hours ago, it seemed she might be next. She fought back her rising panic locking the knees that threatened to buckle under her. *This neighborhood is really going downhill.*

The man behind her sniggered nastily in her ear, "Ah telt him it was worth watching the back door as well as the front." The stubble of his jaw prickled against her cheek and the sour stench of old sweat and tobacco clung to him. "Where is your friend? Ah could'a swore ah got him but unless you've got his body hidden in there somewhere ah must'a missed." It took several seconds for the meaning of his words to become clear to her, this was one of the men who had mugged Jack. *They know who I am and they must have been watching the flat all evening. Why?*

"Ah bet you if we just wait here for a wee while he'll be right down. Then ah can kill twa birds with wan stane." He was right. Any moment now Jack would get out of the shower, find her missing and come looking for her. At the thought of Jack being hurt again by this man, anger swept through her, clearing the fog of fear from her brain. "You are a feisty wee bitch though...maybe we could have a bit of fun. Efter ah take care of your man."

Megan began looking for ways she could stop this, or at least warn Jack. Obliging her brain supplied the image of her letting herself go suddenly limp, breaking her

captor's hold. Unfortunately the knife pressed firmly against her throat dampened her enthusiasm for that move. From the corner of her eye she saw the door open a tiny crack and she knew time had just run out.

Jack was here.

Chapter Eight

Megan tensed, waiting for the big brute to see the opening door but there was no reaction. He hadn't noticed. She knew that Jack would need some kind of diversion otherwise he would never get out unseen. Taking a breath she closed her eyes and leaned back into the unwashed stink of the man's body. The hard ridge of his erection rested just above her buttocks, and pushing back revulsion, she rubbed herself against him and moaned low in her throat.

"Aye, ah knew you'd be hot for it. Like a bit of rough, dae ye?" His whisper was warm and moist in her ear. It made her shiver in disgust. The knife slid slowly down her neck towards her breast. *Now or never. Think heavy.* Keeping her eyes shut tight she let herself drop to the concrete and rolled away on her side.

Behind her she heard a bang as the door hit the wall. Almost simultaneously there was a sickening crack and a high-pitched shriek that chilled her blood. By the time she looked back to the scene, Jack had her captor pinned against the wall by the throat and the terrified man was trying to break the chokehold with one hand. His other hand dangled limply at his side, the wrist bent at an angle that made Megan feel slightly queasy.

Even barefoot and wearing only his damp jeans, Jack broadcast danger. A low rumbling growl emanated from him and his whole body almost vibrated with anger. Although his frame was sleekly muscled, there was little evidence of the kind of strength it took to lift a man easily onto his tiptoes with one hand, or to break his wrist like a dry twig. The man in question was about the same height as Jack but heavier, with the kind of build you might see standing outside a nightclub glaring at the people queuing. His head was shaved and his flat nose had obviously been broken more than once. *Where did this guy come from, Villains 'R' Us?*

"Who sent you?" Jack snarled at him as if reading her mind, but the thug shook his head. Before she could blink, Jack held a switchblade under the man's nose, his eyes widening at the threat from his own weapon.

"Who. Sent. You?"

"Ah dinnae...know!" he gasped. "Ah didnae...see him." When he stopped, Jack merely waited, eyes narrowed, face hard and unyielding.

"It was all...din on the phone... He called and telt us where you were... Paid cash...left it in...the gents at the train station... Half now, half after proof..."

He ground to a halt again, and this time Megan saw Jack's fingers tighten around his throat as he hissed, "Proof?"

The man's face turned an alarming shade of purple and she thought he might actually suffocate before he could answer.

"Pictures!... Of you and the bird...after we'd...din you," he managed. Megan drew a shocked breath. Jack loosened his grip again and, encouraged, his captive continued in a rush. "We missed the first time... Telt him a hit and run wisnae a guid bet, but that's what he wanted, said it had tae look accidental. Nothing personal, pal, it wis easy money. All we had t'dae wis show up where he telt us tae."

Nothing personal... Megan shuddered as she realized that this man had nearly killed her twice now. More terrifying was the fact that someone out there still wanted her dead. She glanced at Jack. He was visibly trembling, his incandescent eyes burning holes through the man he held. The knife in his hand was now lying just under the man's chin, a drop of blood welled up where it had nicked the skin.

Jack struggled with fury unlike anything he had ever felt. He wanted to kill the spineless idiot in his grasp who had dared to threaten his mate. The man was silent but for his harsh breathing, and the scent of fear rolled off of him in waves, inflaming Jack's senses even more. He wasn't a human being anymore, he was prey. It was primitive and irrational and Jack didn't care. For endless seconds he teetered on the edge of control until he heard Megan approach him from behind.

"Jack. Let him go, he's not worth it." Her gentle voice and the scent of her calmed him. He jerked his wide-eyed captive against the wall, satisfied when his head hit it with an audible thump. "You better run far and fast 'pal' because the next time I catch up with you will be the last." He let go, and the man crumpled to the ground with a yelp before springing back up and scrambling away cradling his injured wrist.

Jack closed his eyes and simply breathed. Never had he come close to killing someone before, he was as tightly strung as a piano wire. Though he could feel the heat from Megan's body as she stood behind him, he still jerked when she laid a soothing hand on his shoulder. After finishing his shower, he had gone to the kitchen to ask her about his clothes and had seen the empty bin immediately. It hadn't taken a genius to work out what she was doing, especially when he tuned into her thoughts. Concerned for her safety, he had only paused long enough to retrieve his jeans from the dryer and pull them on before following her. He had been halfway down the stairs when she had been grabbed. Her thoughts from then on had become maddeningly disjointed but he caught enough to know that he was dealing with one of the two knife-wielding thugs who had attacked him. It had been all he could do to hold his concentration long enough to send an image to help her break the man's hold.

Reaching up, he took her hand and brought her round in front of him. He traced the outline of a small bruise forming on her cheek and had to rein in his useless anger again. Part of him wanted to be mad at her too, for coming out here at this time of night on her own, but he reminded himself that she hadn't been aware of the danger. Desire and possessiveness radiated through his veins mingling with relief and fear, and he claimed her mouth in a hungry kiss. Nibbling at her lips, demanding entry, plunging his tongue deep when she complied. The taste of her went straight to his head—both of them. When she responded by sucking gently on his tongue, he thought his hard-on would burst straight through his jeans. He wasn't sure if it was the sudden lack of blood to his brain that made him dizzy or the sheer intoxication of desire. Their mouths separated reluctantly, both stealing nips and licks until Megan took a small step back.

Her pupils dilated, cheeks pink with excitement, she ran the tip of her tongue over red, swollen lips.

Jack stifled the impulse to pull her back into his arms. He had to find out who was after them and why, and he needed to keep his mate safe while he did it. With his family out of contact, there was only one other person he could think to go to for help and he lived right here in Scotland. Cameron Murray would not be happy to see him, though, and taking Megan there might be like jumping from the frying pan to the fire.

"Jack?" Megan looked at him, passion fading from her eyes, brows pulled together in concern. "Who would want to hire someone to kill us?"

Jack returned her gaze, giving a small shrug of his shoulders. He was still as clueless as she clearly was. "I don't know, but I'm going to try to find out. Right now we have to get out of here, it's not safe and if we stay any longer we might put your friend in danger, too." He expected her to argue, saw the intent in her eyes, but anxiety about her friend's safety seemed to squelch it. He took her hand and led her back inside before she could change her mind, making plans as he climbed the stairs.

"Where can we go?"

"I have a friend who lives in the north of Scotland. Cameron Murray. He has a big house with a lot of security. So even if we are followed—" *and we probably will be*, he thought, "—you'll be safe." Megan came to an abrupt stop a few stairs behind him, her grip on his hand threatening to topple him backwards. "You mean we will be safe, don't you? Because if you are thinking of dumping me in a stranger's house and going off on some macho crusade, you have another think coming."

That had actually been very close to his plans but one look at the mutinous expression on her face made him revise them. Jack swore he could feel his blood pressure rising again. If the bad guy didn't kill him, his mate surely would! Muttering under his breath, he tugged on her hand and continued on up the stairs.

* * * * *

Jack studied his mate as she slept soundly in the passenger seat of her car. She had tilted the seat back as far as it would go and was curled up on her side. The seat belt fastened around her, knees pulled up towards her chest. It had taken longer than he wanted to get started on their journey since he had to collect his things, change clothes and check out of the hotel. He'd offered to take Megan to her apartment so that she could pack a few more belongings but she'd said it wasn't necessary. Instead she'd borrowed a few things from Jayne to add to what she had already packed, insisting she could buy anything else she needed. He knew she couldn't afford it and had silently resolved to pay for anything she needed himself. It was his duty now to provide for his mate—though he didn't look forward to her reaction when he told her that.

Jayne hadn't been happy with his intention to whisk her friend away in the middle of the night with no explanation. In the end he had to tell her that someone was following him and now Megan, and that he needed to take her somewhere safe until he found out why. Jayne hadn't been entirely happy about that either but since Megan had unhesitatingly backed him up, there hadn't been much she could do about it. Before they left, though, she had gotten the last word. His lips curved as he remembered them.

"You hurt my friend, or let someone else hurt her, and I will hunt you down, cut off your balls and feed them to you."

With a quiet chuckle he turned his attention back to the dark road, checking again for headlights in the rearview mirror. The sky was still cloudy but occasionally the moon shone through the gaps and gilded hedgerows and fields of livestock with silver. They had left the busy motorway behind them long ago and joined the winding maze of dark country roads leading to Cameron's estate. There were so many twists and turns that a clever enough pursuer should be able to stay far enough back that he wouldn't be seen. He could count the number of cars they had passed in the last hour on one hand, so it should be easier now to spot anyone following them. Jack wasn't taking any chances, though.

The closer they got the more anxious he became, for himself, for Megan and for his friend. He didn't know how Cameron would react to Megan's presence. In fact, he didn't even know how welcome he would be himself—he hadn't had any personal contact with Cam for months. His friend had locked himself away in his house, rarely seeing anyone anymore. Before last August, he had at least received a phone call every few weeks. Now there wasn't even that. Jack suspected he still held himself at least partly to blame for Nick's disappearance despite Jack's efforts to convince him otherwise. Frustrated, he had asked Cameron's housekeeper to stay in touch. As long as he kept receiving those e-mails, he knew Cam was all right.

The radio played quietly in the background and the weather report distracted him momentarily. Cool night air mussed his hair as it blew in the slightly open window. It brought with it the scent of the rain promised by the bulletin and the unfamiliar smells of the countryside. He welcomed the chill since it helped keep him alert. God, he was so tired. This couldn't go on. How could he protect his mate if he spent half the time exhausted from shifting? Megan must trust him, all of her actions said that she did even though she didn't seem to believe it herself. Yet he was still reluctant to tell her about the blood exchange. Why? He looked at her sleeping form and a wave of tenderness washed over him.

I love her...and I'm afraid to lose her.

The realization stunned him. His fingers tightened on the steering wheel as he acknowledged the truth of the words. He had known it was a possibility, after all, it was one of the reasons he had searched for so long. He just hadn't expected to fall for her so soon. Megan was attractive and funny and fiercely independent. Already he could hardly picture his future without her in it. Dearbh Ceangal or not, Jack was very much afraid that when he gave her the choice she would not feel the same.

He pushed aside his concerns as the hedgerows bounding the road gave way to the edge of the thick pine forest that surrounded Murray House. The only access road was a

rutted one-lane track leading through the trees. It was well concealed and he almost drove past it.

Megan woke as he hit the first pothole, she blinked gritty eyes and sat up stiffly. Her mouth felt like it was filled with cotton and she licked her dry lips and wished she'd thought to pack a drink. She glanced at Jack's profile in the dim light inside the car. He said nothing, just concentrated on navigating the narrow dusty gravel road illuminated by the headlights. Pine trees towered over them on either side and she shivered as she stared through the bushes at their base into darkness thick enough to cut. Their fresh, distinctive smell wafted in the open window mixed with the moist smell of earth. She'd always had a good imagination and thoughts of what could be lurking in there made the back of her neck prickle.

"Where are we?"

Jack flicked a glance at her before turning his attention back to the road and answering. "We're almost there, the house is about half a mile ahead."

The car bounced into another hole and she winced at the potential damage to her small vehicle. "You've been here before then?"

"A few times, but it has been a while," he said and fell silent again.

Questions clamored at her, she was desperately curious about their destination but Jack didn't seem to be in the mood to talk. They were nearly there anyway. She could be patient. There was a sound suspiciously like a snort from the other side of the car and she looked sharply at his impassive face. Jack glanced at her, his expression inquiring. "What?"

"Nothing." She shook her head and stared out into the trees, soft music from the radio filled the silence again. A short time later they rounded yet another bend in the road and stopped in front of a large set of black, spiked, iron gates. They were set into a red sandstone wall that must have been at least ten feet high. The red eye of a security camera glowed from the top of the wall on the right. Beyond the gates a long paved

driveway curved away towards the dark silhouette of an enormous mansion house. Two of the windows she could see had light shining softly from them, even at this ungodly hour—one on the second floor and the other on the ground floor. Beside her Jack rolled down the window and pressed a button on the telecom that was mounted on a post beside the road. The speaker hissed as it was activated but no one spoke. The gate was already opening when Jack announced, “It’s Jack, Cam.”

His expression grim, he rolled up the window and drove through the gates. He didn’t look happy at the prospect of seeing an old friend. In fact he seemed worried. Perhaps understandable since he hadn’t phoned to tell him that they were coming, despite Megan’s request. Jack seemed to think it was a better idea just to arrive. However, it was the trace of nerves she could feel from him that she found more disturbing. *What exactly were they heading for here?* After the last few days, Megan didn’t think her stress levels could get any higher but they were climbing again now. Her neck and shoulders were tight with it.

The headlights showed well-trimmed grass on either side of the road stretching off into the darkness. As they rounded the driveway, the lights swept over the house and she saw it was constructed of the same stone as the outer wall. Jack eased the car to a stop at the foot of the stone steps and switched off the engine.

The atmosphere vibrated with tension as he climbed out of the cooling vehicle, and after a few seconds Megan followed. She shivered slightly both from the breeze and nerves. Jack wrapped his arm around her, enveloping her in the comforting heat and scent of his body and they climbed the stairs to the heavy wooden front door together.

To Megan’s dismay, Jack simply opened it and pulled her into the house, closing it gently behind them. Before she could sputter in protest, he murmured, “Trust me.” Then transferred his grip to her hand. She missed the closeness of the embrace even though the entryway was pleasantly warm. And silent. There wasn’t a sound save for the ticking of the grandfather clock that stood against the wall at the bottom of the staircase on her left. If she didn’t know better, she would swear the big house was

empty, but someone had let them in. *Get a grip, Megan. You're behaving like the heroine of a gothic romance*, she scolded herself. Resolutely she straightened her shoulders, determined to shake off her strange mood, and took in her surroundings.

It was all very tasteful and very masculine, so far, at least. The walls and the doors, as well as the few pieces of furniture, were all wood, the shining brass wall lights made it glow with rich color. A dark red patterned carpet covered the floor, continuing on the stairs to the open landing of the first floor and out of sight. In front of them an unlit hallway led away towards the back of the house. Her curiosity made her long to explore further.

Jack's grip tightened on her hand and as she turned to look at him, movement on the landing caught her eye. A man stood there, unsmiling, both hands leaning on the wooden banister. The two men stared at each other in silence. Megan gasped in surprise.

He was a big man, tall and broad at the shoulders, his golden hair shone in the soft light that drifted up from the hall. As if he sensed Megan's appraisal, he switched his amber gaze to her. She swallowed nervously. With that one look into his eyes, she instinctively knew this man was like Jack. With one difference. Until now she had thought Jack had an air of danger about him, but this man, this man personified danger. She could feel it radiating from him like pressure in the atmosphere. His voice, when he spoke was smooth and deep, American, flavored with a hint of Scottish. It was a beautiful voice, but his words destroyed her appreciation of it.

"What the hell is she doing here, Jack?"

Chapter Nine

Jack didn't react to the curt words. In fact he seemed to expect them. Megan on the other hand was astonished. She didn't even know this man. What could he possibly have against her? Something in her wanted to cower at the barely suppressed animosity in his tone and that only made her angry. As if sensing her reaction, Jack soothingly caressed the back of the hand he held with his thumb.

"I needed to bring her somewhere safe, Cam," he answered calmly, not taking his eyes off of his friend.

Cameron gave a harsh, humorless bark of laughter. "You know better than that, Jack."

Again the words drew no reaction from Jack other than the soothing caress on her hand that seemed to urge her silence as he continued. "Someone is trying to kill us." He relayed the close calls they had had of the past couple of days ending with the information that he had obtained from the man who had attacked her. "I need your help to find out who and why." Emotion flickered across the other man's face too quickly interpret.

"Do you want me to call the team?"

Jack paused, considering. The team was a group of shifters who helped ensure that their species remained a secret. If there was any threat to their way of life, be it from humans or other shapeshifters, they dealt with it. They wouldn't hesitate to come if Cameron called them, after all, he used to be one of them. Still was, in some ways.

"No," he answered. "Not yet, let's see if we can deal with this on our own first." Jack knew most of them, but not well enough to know if he could trust their restraint around Megan.

Cam nodded, his eyes narrowed on Megan. "Keep her away from me."

Megan stared after him, bewildered by the exchange, as he turned and walked silently back into the darkness towards the next floor. As his friend disappeared, Jack sighed deeply and his shoulders dropped with the release of tension. He lifted a hand to rub the back of his neck and turned to face her. "Stay here while I go get the bags." With a final squeeze of her hand, he left her standing in the empty hallway waiting in vain for an explanation.

She barely had time to gather her thoughts before he returned and wordlessly led the way to the first floor and into a softly lit bedroom. He dropped the bags on the floor at the foot of the oak four-poster bed and went to the window. Frustrated at his continued silence, she shut the door behind her with more force than was necessary. Not that he seemed to notice as he continued staring out at the dark night with his back to her. It was all it took for Megan to reach the end of her rope.

In the last few days she had gained a crazy American admirer with the persistence of a mosquito and been overtaken with lust for him. Nearly been run over by a car and been terrified by a wild creature in her apartment. Given first aid to a stab wound, been shown her crazy admirer and the wild cat were one and the same. Been held at knifepoint and threatened with rape. Found out someone was trying to kill her then dragged halfway across the country to the house of a man who didn't want her anywhere near him and no one was telling her why!

A hard tremor shook the length of her body heralding the emotional storm that was bearing down on her. Megan wasn't a crier. After her parents' death she had thought she had no more tears left, and she refused to do it in front of Jack. She yanked her nightshirt from her bag. Eyes burning, struggling to rein in her wayward emotions, she flung it on the foot of the bed. There was really no point in crying, after all she was here, she was alive, and so was Jack. What good would it do? With swift angry motions she stripped off her clothes and perched on the edge of the mattress in her peach satin bra and panties.

She was winning the battle when Jack left the window and knelt in front of her, his desire for her evident in his eyes and the reaction of his body. This was why she was here, this enigmatic man who had turned her world upside down and made her abandon the rules and routine she had fallen into. She wanted to berate him for it but it was becoming more than obvious that he was as lost in this situation as she was.

His expression remained somber and when he spoke his voice was tinged with regret. "I'm sorry I got you into this, Megan, but I can't be sorry that I found you."

He leaned forward, cupped her face and claimed her mouth with a tenderness that emptied all her concerns from her head. She poured all her feelings into the kiss, sucking gently on his tongue, clutching his shoulders through his dark T-shirt. Arousal rushed through her, stealing her breath and her reason, leaving her panties damp. She moaned as Jack ran callused fingers through her hair, over her shoulders and back, pausing to unhook her bra. He broke away from her lips, murmuring to her and brushing tiny soothing kisses along her jaw. With impatient hands, she pulled his T-shirt over his head leaving his dark hair tousled, and allowed him to urge her back onto the mattress behind her.

She loved the weight of him when he laid his body the length of hers, surrounding her with his musky male scent. *God he smells so good.* She ran a hand along his jaw, smiling when he rubbed against her like a cat seeking her caress, his dark stubble prickling her palm. Soundlessly he yielded to the pressure of her hand against his shoulder and rolled so that she straddled him. Through the soaked satin of her underwear, she felt the hard bulge of his erection straining against his zipper. She rocked her hips against him, tearing a harsh groan from his lips, and began to explore his broad shoulders and hair-dusted chest.

Her hands were pale against the dusky gold of his skin, and smiling, she traced her finger down from the dip at the base of his throat and along the curve of his pectorals. She raised her eyes to his face, meeting his molten silver gaze as she circled his nipples. They beaded instantly at her touch and she slid down his body and ran the tip of her

tongue around each of them. Jack's mouth twitched in a half smile that promised recompense. Keeping her eyes on his face, she traced the path of dark hair down the center of his hard belly until she reached the waistband of his jeans. He sifted his fingers through her hair and she took his hands in hers and guided them to the bed.

"Let me do this, Jack, please."

"Megan, you don't have —"

She interrupted his protest. "I know, I want to. Let me taste you, Jack." A muscle twitched in the hard line of his jaw and he released his grip allowing her to unbutton his jeans. Megan watched with undisguised fascination as his erection forced the zipper the rest of the way down until his cock sprang free to bob against his abdomen. "You're beautiful, Jack." Smiling wickedly, she captured the velvety hard flesh in her hand and stroked him from crown to base slowly. Jack moaned, eyes closed, and lifted his hips into her touch. Circling the base of his shaft she leaned into him and raised her eyes to see him looking at her. Deliberately she licked her lips drawing his attention to her mouth, the expression on his face causing her nipples to tighten painfully. The muscles of her womb clenched in anticipation, releasing a trickle of moisture down the inside of her thigh.

His body trembled with restraint when she ran her lips and tongue around the blunt head of his cock, savoring the salty taste of his flesh and the smooth, hot feel of him. When she investigated the little triangle underneath, a harsh gasp escaped him, his hips thrust helplessly upwards. "Megan, please..."

Stretching her mouth wide to accommodate his girth, she took him in her mouth, taking as much of his length as she was able. Her tongue caressed the vein-ridged flesh on the underside as she withdrew, sucking gently. She repeated the motion, this time using her free hand to stroke and explore his lightly furred sack. Jack was panting now, "Harder..." His hands grasped her head and urged her on, his hips thrusting in tempo with her mouth as he reached blindly for his climax. She could taste the salty-sweet of his pre-come on her tongue, feel the throb and pulse of her own body, and moaned.

"Oh, fuck...Megan...Meg... I'm coming!" he gasped and tried to pull away. She held him firmly, swallowing his seed as it erupted from him, reveling in his harsh groan of completion.

Tenderly Megan kissed the pink scar on his side, marveling at how quickly the wound was healing. At the time she had been sure she was going to watch him bleed to death. She ignored the memories that wanted to distract her and crawled up to rest her head on his chest, listening to the thumping of his heart as it gradually slowed to its normal rhythm. Jack hooked a finger under her chin and tilting her face up to his, he kissed her. "Thank you."

Effortlessly he turned them so that they both lay on their sides, her bottom nestled against his sex. She rubbed against him feeling the coarseness of his hair against the smooth skin of her back. "Your turn," he whispered. Turning her head, she kissed him, hissing when he nipped her lip then soothed the small sting with his tongue and kissed his way along her jaw to her neck. Her head tilted instinctively to give him access while his hand roamed over her breasts pausing to torment her nipples into tingling berry-red peaks.

"Have I ever told you I love your breasts? I love the way your nipples darken and bead when you're turned on...and I love it when all that creamy white skin flushes pink with embarrassment...or arousal." Jack's soft words and the touch of his warm breath on her neck made her heart pound and shivers of awareness tingle through her body. His hand slipped lower to the notch of her thighs, petting her dark curls, sliding over the already wet entrance to her body.

Megan whimpered and rocked against his hand then cried out when his fingers circled her clitoris. "Jack!"

"You're so wet for me, baby, what is it you want? Tell me Meg." His fingers moved again, tracing gently along her labia, and her inner muscles clenched again in reaction.

"I want you inside me, Jack...please." Against her bottom she could feel his soft cock and she rocked her bottom into him.

Jack chuckled wryly, "I'm afraid he hasn't recovered quite yet, honey, but..." He eased two fingers inside her. "I'm sure we'll think of something else."

Her inner muscles clasped his fingers as he began to move them, tension already building in her body. His thumb began circling her throbbing clit, she could hear his ragged breathing next to her ear mingling with her own moans. "Come for me, Megan!" He pressed harder with his thumb and a third finger joined the other two, filling her unbearably. Her muscles tightened, tightened until she came in a rush, arching soundlessly into his fingers as pleasure stole her breath.

Little aftershocks continued to pulse through her body as Jack withdrew his hand and wrapped her in his embrace, his cock now semi-hard against her hip. They lay in silence for endless moments, each wrapped in their own thoughts. With a suddenness that startled her, he wrenched himself away, leaving her gasping for breath. Belatedly she registered the furnace-like heat of Jack's body, far overpowering the natural heat their lovemaking had generated.

He began to scratch, leaving red welts on his golden skin. His gaze seemed to turn inward as he groaned, "No. No. Not now, dammit!" Her heart lurched in her chest at the agonized expression on his face and the harshness of his exclamation. She rose to her knees, reaching for him, desperate to ease the pain somehow but he scrambled away from her. His back slammed against the solid oak headboard in his haste to escape her touch. "NO! Don't want to hurt you." His voice had already lost its humanity, the last words almost unintelligible.

The change was no easier to witness than the first time, the tears she had managed to fight back rolled unheeded down her cheeks as she perched helplessly on the edge of the bed. When it was over, he lay panting on his side, exhausted. Megan moved beside him, swiping at the useless tears, before fondling his ears and stroking his face. "Oh Jack, how do you do it? Why? Isn't there anything you can do to stop it?" He licked her fingers and heaved a huge sigh. Megan smiled sadly and shook her head at the futility

of their situation. Lying down on the thick comforter beside him, she sank her fingers into the soft fur on his side and fell into an exhausted slumber.

* * * * *

The vast entryway didn't look forbidding at all, Megan decided. She paused halfway down the stairs and turned back to admire the beautiful round, stained glass window pouring color onto the landing. It featured an unfamiliar coat of arms, presumably representing the Murray family, and was a detail she had completely missed last night in the darkness. Not to mention the fact that their reluctant host had been standing in front of it and had had all her attention. She turned again to look up to the second floor where she had glimpsed an identical window and wondered what other unexpected surprises the house held.

At the foot of the stairs she caught the faint scent of coffee and followed it towards the back of the house hoping to find Jack somewhere nearby. When she woke there had been no sign of him. *If he has left me alone in this house with his bad-tempered friend, there's going to be hell to pay.*

At the end of the hallway she found a large, bright kitchen. The cabinets were a golden-hued pine, the walls tiled in white and the floor in slate. There was a glass conservatory attached to one side allowing soft gray light to fill the room and reflect off of the polished surfaces of a multitude of appliances and gizmos. The conservatory itself held a large pine table and chairs and the windows were lined with well-tended plants. Sitting there to eat would be like sitting outside, Megan thought, only without the rain and bugs.

The door was open, leading onto a patio with what looked like beds of fresh herbs. Further on a wide lawn sloped down towards a bank of pine trees and a blue-gray loch was just visible through them. This was obviously a room someone loved and was equipped to prepare for dinner parties, small or large. Somehow she could not see the

man from last night on his hands and knees pruning herbs or spending hours cooking so she assumed he must have staff...somewhere. Ordinarily a room like this charmed her. *And it will, she thought, as soon as I get my hands on that coffee.*

The machine sat on the counter directly in front of her so she quickly helped herself to a mug from the stand beside it, filling it with the fragrant brew. As she raised the mug to her lips she felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise to attention. Turning quickly, she found herself pinned again by the golden gaze of Cameron Murray. The man was even bigger than she had thought. He towered over her from just a few feet away dressed in faded jeans and an oatmeal-colored knitted sweater. She took a quick step back and was brought up short by the kitchen counter, then immediately berated herself for letting him intimidate her. *It's a tragedy that such a babe should have such a bad attitude.* Throat suddenly dry, she croaked out a greeting, "Morning."

He continued to stare at her in silence, broad chest expanding as he inhaled deeply. A barely perceptible tremor ran through him as he exhaled. Megan watched his pupils expand and was suddenly grateful that she had showered before coming downstairs. It seemed increasingly likely that he was a shapeshifter like Jack and no doubt would have been able to smell the scent of last night's lovemaking. He lifted his hand and her muscles tensed in anticipation of his touch. He clenched his fist briefly, seeming to fight some internal battle then took the mug of coffee from her fingers instead.

"Jack is a friend so I guess I'm stuck with you for now. You can go wherever you like in the house but stay away from me and keep out of the second floor!" he commanded softly. His eyes flicked briefly towards the conservatory and he turned abruptly and stalked out of the room.

Megan watched him leave, mouth open in astonishment, barely resisting the urge to check and see if she had somehow been transported to the enchanted castle from the Beauty and the Beast fairytale. *What the hell have I gotten myself into here?*

Following the path of Cameron's gaze, she was unsurprised to find Jack watching her. What did surprise her, though, was that he was still a cat. A wave of apprehension

swept through her. Megan had never seen him transformed for longer than a few hours before and although he hadn't said how long the changes lasted, something told her this was not normal. The transformation seemed to take so much energy and she recalled how tired he had looked last night. Was it possible he just didn't have enough strength to shift back again yet? Even as she completed the thought, she dismissed it. The change wasn't voluntary so how much strength he had wouldn't really matter, would it? So why was he still standing before her on four legs instead of two?

She looked into Jack's eyes and what she saw there worried her even more. *Fear*. It was gone so quickly she might have imagined it, though she knew she had not. As she watched, a shudder rippled through the sleek body and he started towards the door.

"Wait, Jack!" He turned back towards her as she approached. His body still poised for flight, even as another tremor shook him. "It's happening, isn't it? Please, don't leave. I know I can't be much help, but I want to stay with you." She placed her hand on his powerful shoulders and felt the heat that was becoming so familiar radiating through his thick fur. After a moment, he took a few steps away from her and laid down.

Again the transformation lasted only a few agonizing minutes, but to Megan it seemed like hours as she knelt on the cold tiles watching with silent empathy. When it was over, she crawled to his side. His whole body was trembling with exhaustion and his eyes were dull with the remnants of pain. He lifted one hand and cupped her face. "Just once, I would really like to wake up in a bed with you," he whispered hoarsely.

She laughed half-heartedly. "You aren't missing much. I'm really not a morning person."

Jack's hand fell back to his side and his eyes closed, a small grin tugged at one side of his mouth. "Bet I could change your mind," he mumbled. She felt color suffuse her cheeks at his words and smiled at the reaction, after the last few days she had no reason to blush. She brushed her fingers over his silky hair and listened with surprise to his deep rumbling purr. The skin under his eyes was even more bruised by fatigue and his

cheekbones stood out in sharp relief. He climbed stiffly to his feet and tugged her up along with him. Everything about his appearance said all was not well in Jack's world. Though he had said that shapeshifting was normal and natural for him, Megan was becoming more certain that there was something else he had not told her.

"I'm going to take a shower." He bent and kissed her, just a soft brush of his lips. And, she silently admitted to herself as she watched him walk away, she had fallen in love with the man.

Drawn back to the garden, she poured herself another coffee and perched on the low brick wall surrounding the patio. *I still can't believe that...swine! Stole my coffee!* Megan pushed the thought away and simply enjoyed the unpolluted highland air. Though the granite wall and the stones of the patio were dry, the air smelled damp, suggesting rain wasn't far away and the cloudy, gray, late morning sky was beginning to darken with the promise of it. She marveled over the changes the last few days had wrought on her life. Jack Douglass had swept through it like a charming wrecking ball.

It was a little tough to take, and still that little voice in the back of her mind said it wasn't over yet. She had all but turned her brain inside out searching for some reason why anyone would want her dead and come up with nothing. Cameron Murray, unpleasant though he was, apparently had resources which would help them find out. As well as a safe haven for them.

It grated on her independent nature to turn the reins over to someone else but there seemed to be little else she could do at the moment but wait. Part of her hoped that Jack and his friend would quickly find out who was after them so that she could go back to her nice, normal—safe—life and pretend none of this had happened. But that would probably mean never seeing Jack again and that was unthinkable. How was it possible to come to need someone so much in such a short time?

Chapter Ten

Jack climbed out of the shower and dried himself off with brisk swipes of the towel. A quick study in the mirror told him that his knife wound was completely healed, not even leaving a scar to mark its seriousness. One of the benefits of his species. He began to dress, trying to shake off the tension that gripped him. It was obvious that Megan was beginning to realize something was wrong. Something other than being the target of a mysterious assassin, that is, he thought with dark humor. But the fear would not be brushed aside this time, there had been a point in the early hours of this morning when he had thought that it was over and he had waited too long. The cat had taken over completely. He couldn't wait any longer, he would ask her today if she would complete the bond with him, and if she chose not to...the thought shook him... Then he would leave her in Cameron's care and use whatever time he had left to find and stop whoever was after them.

The idea of leaving her with his friend wasn't one which sat easily, and he growled in instinctive protest. Cam was beginning his mating cycle and though he had no intention of taking a mate, even Cameron's formidable will would be tested. Jack trusted him to find somewhere safe for Megan before he lost control but there was little he could do about any shapeshifters who might seek her out in the future. In the end, it had been fairly easy for *him* to track her down. It might be wise to take further advantage of Cam's skills and wipe mention of her birthmark from her medical files.

The thought had barely formed when he heard the bedroom door snick shut, but it wasn't Megan's presence he felt. A cool breath of air slid through the half-open door causing the steam to swirl and eddy and bringing with it a familiar scent. Prepared for the conflict that had been building since they had arrived, he pulled on a sweater and walked into the bedroom.

Cameron lounged against the wall, his tone and posture deceptively relaxed, but Jack had known him too long not to feel the barely restrained anger and worry.

“So, how long have we got before I have to call your parents and tell them to start building a cage?”

Jack’s laugh was sharp and bitter as he turned his back and stared out of the window into the misty gray morning. Trust Cam to get straight to the point.

His silence seemed to push his friend over some invisible line and the calm façade disintegrated. “Dammit, Jack! They have already lost one son this year, they do *not* need to lose the second! What were you thinking?”

As his friend no doubt intended, mention of his missing brother provoked instant reaction. Jack rounded on his friend and growled, “Nick is *not* dead.”

He drew in a calming breath, guilt, fear and anger swarmed in his veins. “It was time. They know I was looking for a mate, I couldn’t put it off forever.” He shot a glance at his friend who had every intention of doing that very thing. “She’s the one, Cam. I felt it the minute I saw her, a Dearbh Ceangal. I know you don’t believe in it but it’s real.”

Cam shook his head in his usual stubborn denial and began to pace out his agitation. “If you believe that, then why haven’t you finished it?!”

“I will not force this on her, Cam, she has to choose.” He faced the other man knowing his sharp mind would eventually reach the logical conclusion.

“How can she let you do this? She is your mate, how can she stand back and let you throw away your humanity...your life, like this!” The pacing halted abruptly. “She doesn’t know, does she? Why the hell haven’t you told her?!”

“I was going to tell her... No, the hell with it, that’s a lie. I was just going to take her, seduce her, complete the bond then tell her what I had done to her!” Jack’s voice rose to a near shout, rich with disgust at his own arrogance. He ran a hand through his dark hair and said softly, “Then I fell in love with her...and I couldn’t do it. If I tell her what happens to me if she walks away, she’ll stay. She’s too good, Cam, too damn nice!

I want her with me because she feels the same way I do. If that means I have to let her go, then so be it."

An uncomfortable silence fell around them thick with unspoken anxiety. Cameron was the first to break it. "I'm making some progress into finding out who is after you but I don't have anything concrete yet." He blew out a frustrated breath and stalked to the door, halting with his hand on the doorknob. "I don't want to lose anyone else I care about either, Jack. Tell her...or I will."

He found Megan just closing the conservatory door in the kitchen. Droplets of moisture clung to her dark hair like diamonds from the light rain that had begun to fall. His feet were silent on the tiled floor as he stalked towards her, drawn by the fierce urge to take her, possess her. Her scent filled his lungs mixed with the fresh tang of Highland air and his cock hardened painfully.

She turned towards him taking a quick startled breath. "Jack." Her hand went to her chest. "You scared the life out of me. I am definitely going to have get a bell for around your neck," she drawled, her rueful grin taking the sting out of her comment.

With effort, Jack reined in the demands of his body. This was definitely not the time. Taking her hand he led her to the table and before she could take another chair, pulled her onto his lap. Their gazes met when she felt the evidence of his desire and she grinned and rocked her hips. "Good God, woman!" he ground out, "Hold still!" Jack closed his eyes and fought to cool his unruly body. The problem would be easily solved if he moved her to the other chair but he wanted her closer than that.

"I need to talk to you," he said quietly. Absently he traced a finger over her jeans high on her thigh where he knew her birthmark lay, making her shiver. Her fingers played in the hair at the nape of his neck and he leaned into the caress and purred.

Megan laughed delightedly, "You do that a lot recently." Jack's arousal vanished as he realized the truth of her words. He hadn't even noticed he was doing it. More and

more the behavior of his counterpart was seeping over outside of his shifting. It only emphasized how little time he had left to finish this, one way or the other.

"When we first met... You were right to think I had been sitting in front of that door waiting for you." She stiffened and her fingers withdrew from his hair. He mourned the loss but pressed on. "The fact that you could hear my voice in your head had nothing to do with an active imagination. I was testing you." She tried to pull away from him and he held on, looking into her angry eyes.

"Don't, Jack, I don't know how you found that out but there is no such thing as telepathy."

Yeah, right. That's what you said about shapeshifters.

Her eyes widened. Astonishment and acceptance replacing anger, she demanded, "Do that again."

You told me shapeshifters didn't exist, either.

"Oh, good grief. Can you do that to anyone?" The tinge of excitement in her voice surprised him.

"No, sometimes with close family and friends I feel their emotions. Finding someone who is...compatible with you is...difficult."

A crimson flush of embarrassment washed over her face. "I suppose you...read thoughts as well?"

"Only yours and at the moment it's like a badly tuned radio. The closer I am to the signal, the more easily I receive something." Hers were a blur as her mind worked to accept the new information but he saw the instant she put two and two together.

"Wait a minute. You said you were testing me...and what do you mean, 'at the moment'?"

Jack paused, gathering his thoughts and ignoring the nerves that tap-danced in his stomach he again caressed her jean-clad thigh. "Have you ever noticed how your birthmark resembles a cat's paw print?"

Megan's hand closed over his, ceasing the restless movement and he thought she was going to demand he answer her questions. Instead she said warily, "Yes, it does but...what does my birthmark have to do with this?"

"When my kind reach adulthood they have the ability...the need...to form a bond with a mate, a connection that joins the couple for the rest of their lives." She listened intently as he tried to explain. "So when the time comes, we begin to search for someone bearing the birthmark that tells us they can be mated. I searched for a long time for the right person, all over the world."

She frowned at him and he felt her tension rising as she made the connection. "So it's just a lucky dip? You find a girl who has this mark and that's it, she's the one?"

"Well...yes, it can be. The physical attraction between a pair is usually very strong—"

"But—"

He carried on before she could protest further. "Wait, please, I'm not finished. It can just be about sex but if you're patient, and very lucky you can have a Dearbh Ceangal. A true match in every way, heart..." He placed his hand on her chest. "...mind..." His hand moved to touch her forehead and down to tilt her face up, his lips a breath away from hers. "...and soul." He kissed her gently. "You're my Dearbh Ceangal, Megan."

When she pulled away this time he let her go. "Why me? I mean how do you *know* I'm your...Derv Ke-an-gal? I mean, I have feelings for you, Jack." She gave an uncertain smile. "Big scary ones, but we barely know each other."

Jack's heart turned over in his chest at her admission. He was becoming well acquainted with those kind of feelings himself. "The first things you already know about—the birthmark and the telepathy, those are present for any couple. When we meet our *true* mate, it's like all the magical energy that makes us what we are becomes supercharged and reaches out for her. It's an unmistakable feeling and many of us never get to experience it."

For an eternity she stood in silence, hands fisted in her unruly curls, absorbing the implication of his words, before she faced him. "How do you do it? I mean, what exactly is involved in 'bonding'?"

She's asking questions. Asking questions is a good sign, isn't it? A tiny seed of hope took root in Jack's heart. She hadn't agreed to do it, but she wasn't running away either...yet. "The moment we touched that first time it started."

Her eyebrows rose and she dropped her hands to her sides. "I remember feeling something, like the shock you get when you take your laundry out of the drier, only stronger. When we shook hands..." She looked at him for confirmation and he nodded. "You know you freaked me out that day, Jack. I thought I was having some sort of paranoid delusions. I convinced myself it was my imagination."

"I know." He shrugged. "You are my mate, and sometimes your thoughts are loud."

Her cheeks pinked again and she scowled at him. "Little did I know, my life was about to get a lot stranger. So what else do you have to do to finish it?"

"We need to exchange a few drops of blood."

"Exchange? Exchange how, Jack? Transfusion? Slice our palms blood brothers style? Hell, the way things tend to go in our conversations, it probably involves drinking it..." Her voice trailed off and she read the truth in his face before he said a word.

"Oh, no! Yuck! Jack, that is just disgusting! Do you have any idea how many blood-borne diseases are out there? How can you do that with a stranger?"

Jack's mouth curved in a reluctant half smile, it wasn't quite the reaction of horror he had anticipated and she still hadn't refused him. "First of all, you're not a stranger. Second, I can't get those diseases and third, after the exchange, it won't matter to you, either." Her mouth dropped open and he almost laughed. This woman never reacted the way he expected. "If you bond with me, you become like me."

The amusement evaporated like water in the desert when he caught Megan's immediate and unguarded thought. *Well. Bet Jayne never thought about this when she encouraged me to believe him...* She slapped a hand reflexively over her mouth. Anger shot through him. "You told Jayne!"

Megan threw up her hands. "Well, look at it from my point of view. I thought you were a fruitcake and I had just had sex with you on my kitchen table! Women share those kinds of events. It's almost the law!" She paced away towards the windows and back again, remorse warring with indignation with every step. Jack tried to put himself in her position and though he didn't want to admit it, she had a point.

"I don't think she really believed it anyway and even if she did, she wouldn't tell anyone. You saw her library, she loves all this stuff!"

Jack began to calm down. There was nothing he could do about it now. He didn't have a clue what Megan meant by the library comment since he'd been a little busy at the time to pay much attention. Something about Jayne Davis niggled at him. He couldn't quite put his finger on what it was, but it told him he could trust her. It was time he started to trust his instincts. After all, ignoring them had gotten him nothing but trouble so far. "All right! Okay! About the bonding thing?"

Megan looked at him, her relief clear at the change of subject. Her expression became serious. "What if I don't want to be furry and telepathic?"

Despite the lighthearted phrasing, a shaft of fear thrust through as he answered. "Then you walk away and I'll never come near you again."

He held his breath, unsure of her intent as she walked back over to the chair. Hands on either side of his head, she leaned down and kissed him. Immediately her tongue demanded access and he provided it, parting his lips while she teased and explored his mouth for too short a time before straightening and stepping away from him. He ached to gather her to him but the distance of her body told him it wasn't what she wanted so he kept his hands clenched at his sides. He expected questions, protests or both but she surprised him again.

“Thank you for telling me, Jack, for giving me the choice. I’m guessing you didn’t really need to. I’m asking you now to give me a little time to think about it.” She left the room quickly, leaving him alone and praying like he’d never prayed before.

Megan’s head was spinning by the time she reached the bedroom. *Just when I think I have things under control, Jack Douglass finds new ways to turn my life upside down!* She sat on the edge of the bed and flopped backwards staring hard at the ceiling as if she could somehow find some answers there. She thought back to her conversation with Jayne about whether or not shapeshifters could be real. *Yeesh, was that just two days ago?* Now, here she was actually considering becoming one, worse still she had not even hesitated in believing it was possible. What did that say about her sanity, she wondered vaguely. Was she becoming so open-minded her brain was in danger of falling out? She still wasn’t entirely sure why she hadn’t turned him down flat and ran for the hills or laughed at him. A few days ago, that was exactly what she would have done.

Speaking of open-minded... The man could read her mind! She might never have privacy ever again. How could she accept the fact that her thoughts might not be her own? She shuddered to think what Jack might have heard crossing her mind the last few days, especially concerning her lustful thoughts about him. At least now she had an explanation for the immediate attraction between them. His Dearb Ceangal... It sounded as if it might be Gaelic, even mentally she struggled with the pronunciation. Was she, with her romantic streak, reading too much into those words? Definitely too many paranormal romances. How many mates could he actually have? After all he hadn’t actually said anything about her being his one and only, though it was implied. Would he turn her into a cat and leave her to go find someone else with a funny birthmark?

Questions, questions...*now* she had questions! Where were all these thoughts a few minutes ago in the kitchen? Instead her mind had gone blank and all she could think of was what it would be like to spend the rest of her life with Jack. She ought to get a pen

and paper and write them all down. Her fingers drummed on the soft quilt and the room suddenly felt too small. Jumping up she grabbed her jacket and raced down the stairs and outside, quietly pulling the heavy front door closed behind her.

Heedless of the light misty rain that brushed her cheeks, Megan hesitated on the wide curving driveway. She wasn't entirely sure where she wanted to go, only that she needed to get outside and away from Jack and his mysterious friend for a while. Indecision nagged at her until she remembered the loch. Sweeping her already damp hair away from her face, she made her way around the building and headed towards the screen of pine trees.

Ever since she had been a child, the castles, lochs and the pine forests that often surrounded them had fascinated her. Her mother had loved the history of the buildings and her father the natural beauty surrounding them. Though she still loved to visit the castles, it was her father's world that had captivated her. Megan still remembered most of the stories of enchanted woods and loch monsters he had charmed and, as she got older, scared her with. It was to those places she still gravitated when she felt a need to escape.

By the time she found a path, her shoes were wet through from walking on the damp grass. Second thoughts assailed her when she saw the trees were denser than they had seemed, the loch not quite as close as it had looked. Too busy thinking about Jack's revelations, she hadn't stopped to consider the wisdom of straying from the house. But, she reasoned, he wouldn't have brought her here if he didn't believe it safe. Reassured, she allowed her memories and her innate stubbornness to lure her into the shelter of the trees.

Though ferns and other greenery grew around the edges, the ground underneath was bare but for a thick, springy brown carpet of fallen needles. A heavy growth of branches above her head dimmed the daylight and gave any sounds a muffled quality. In fact the steady drip of collected rainwater from the boughs above her was all she could hear beyond the scuff of her own footsteps. Megan felt watched. It caused the

hair to stand up on the back of her neck though she could see a good distance through the trees on either side. *That seems to be happening to me a lot recently.*

She steadfastly refused to recall any of the eerie stories from her father and walked quickly on towards the water. Still, her heart was pounding and she nearly leapt onto the narrow pebbly beach. She chuckled and cursed herself for being ridiculous and letting her imagination run away with her. The windows of the house were still visible through breaks in the trees and if anything, that was the most likely source for the feeling. Hands in her coat pockets she walked to the edge of the loch letting the tiny waves lap at the toes of her shoes. It was small, small enough for a decent swimmer to cross it and the dark gray-blue of its center suggested depth. She could see now that the woods circled it and stretched much further on the other side, following the incline of a large hill. No doubt they were the same trees which bordered the road they had entered Cameron Murray's property on. She wondered idly how much of this he owned.

The mist was thicker now, making it look as though the clouds were caught on the steeped tops of the pines. *I am going to be soaked.* She closed her eyes and let the breeze blow moisture against her face, thankful that it wasn't cold. Her jacket was waterproof but it was summer weight and wouldn't provide much protection. In a few months when there would be snow coating the ground and frosting the branches it would be beautiful. Maybe she and Jack could come back then. Jack. It was inevitable, she knew, that her thoughts would lead her back to him. She doubted that even this serenity could calm her thoughts under these circumstances.

He was asking her to give up part of her humanity and form a connection with him that would last a lifetime whether she spent that time with him or not. The lure of experiencing life as a cat was tempting though she wasn't sure the pain he seemed to suffer with the transformation was worth it. As to the telepathy thing. Well, there must be some way to get around it or live comfortably with it. What had his parents done all this time? *I don't care how much you love someone, you still need your privacy sometimes.* He said the ability was intermittent, but would it get stronger if she was like him? Megan

suspected it might and part of her was excited about that. The bottom line was that she loved him, but just how much was she willing to risk for that love when it might not be returned?

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't hear the shifting of the stones behind her until her face was covered by damp fabric. Something wrapped around her chest pinning her arms to her sides. She drew in a breath to scream and choked on the sickly, sweet odor. Coughing, she dug her nails into a dark nylon-clad arm, trying to push the cloth from her face and kicked back with her heel. Her captor grunted when she connected with his leg but her rush of satisfaction was short-lived. The world began to spin around her, her limbs felt like lead and her vision grayed. Megan's last thought as she slid into the darkness was that it was her own damn fault.

Chapter Eleven

Conscious of time running out, the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall mocked Jack. He stalked past it and into the sitting room and threw himself down onto the hunter green leather sofa. A couple of sheets of A4 paper on the coffee table caught his eye. There was a sticky yellow note on top with his name printed in Cam's bold handwriting. He must have left them here rather than interrupt the discussion in the kitchen. It was a printout of names, a few of which sounded familiar. He noted that a small percentage of them seemed to be related, whether they were married couples or family members. Near the bottom of the first page he came to "Nick Douglass" and his heart nearly stopped in his chest. These had to be names of missing people. The terse handwritten statement at the bottom of the following page confirmed it.

"These are names of known shapeshifters who have disappeared or been killed in accidents or under unsolved murders in the last two years."

There had to be close to sixty names on the pages. How had this gone unnoticed? Papers clutched in his fist he raced to the second floor and Cam's office where his friend sat in his accustomed place in front of his computer. "How many of these deaths can we be reasonably sure were genuine accidents?"

Cam swiveled around in his chair, turning his back on the information scrolling down the screen and folded his hands behind his head. He nodded his head towards more printouts on the desk. "I eliminated the ones I don't believe are connected to this. *That* is the twelve that are left, six couples." Jack picked up the list, scanning it while Cam talked. "All but one couple died in what looked like accidents but police were suspicious enough to keep the cases open. On the surface they are all different, the only similarity is that they all occurred in the UK. Unless you know that at least one half of

the pair was a shapeshifter and the other carried the cat paw birthmark. Since they also occurred sporadically over the course of two years, no one has connected them."

He didn't question how the man had got his information. He had yet to come across anyone who had as much talent with computers as Cameron Murray, and working in the computer industry he had met his fair share. "What about the other couple?"

"Two years ago, Paul Spencer and his new bride drank champagne laced with enough sedative to drop an elephant and were shot and killed in their honeymoon suite. The couple obviously assumed the bottle was complimentary, the champagne left in the room before their arrival. No one was seen entering or leaving the suite. No one was ever arrested for the murder. Whoever killed them knew enough to use a powerful drug that was odorless and sweet enough to be disguised by the champagne. They were both shot repeatedly in the head, leaving no chance of survival. Had they been human, a single shot to the chest would have done the job if the sedative hadn't already. I think this murder started it all. Whoever killed them knew what they were. What all those couples were. That first one was personal, he just doesn't like to get his hands dirty anymore."

Jack tossed the list back onto the table. "So find out who murdered Mr. and Mrs. Spencer and we find out who is after us." He paused, his brother's name had been on that list too. "Do you think the missing people on the list could be connected?"

"I don't know, Jack, my head says no. Our species isn't always as sociable as you and I." He smiled wryly, "We do have a tendency to live in isolated areas, given our nature. We can probably also rule out a lot of these as victims of the mating cycle. Anyway, Nick and two other men are the only ones to disappear here in Britain." He shrugged and rubbed his eyes. "I just don't like loose ends."

Although Jack was aware that Cameron was still talking to him, he was no longer listening. Since she left him in the kitchen Megan had been a steady and reassuring presence in the back of his mind. Now as if someone had flipped a switch, that link had

suddenly vanished. He had been aware of a powerful wash of anger and fear and now, nothing.

“Megan!” Jack raced for the door, cursing himself for not paying closer attention to her. Instead, he had given her the privacy she feared she would lose. Torn between needing and not wanting to know what her decision might be, he had worried that he would be unable to resist influencing her and deliberately distanced himself. Now terror filled him at the thought that he may have cost his mate her life.

Allowing his senses to guide him he followed her scent from their bedroom, outside and into the light misty rain that already threatened to wipe away the trail. He followed as quickly as he dared. Deep menacing growls rumbled through him by the time he reached the edge of the loch. A dull red haze of fury descended, stealing his control and bringing the beast closer. The scent in the woods had been tinged with fear but here it was stronger. Someone else had been here. There was something odd about the male’s scent, though. Mingling with the odor of chloroform was something unidentifiable that made the hair on Jack’s body stand on end. A hand clamped down hard on his shoulder as he turned back to the woods where the trail continued. Snarling, he faced his attacker only to find Cameron standing behind him, his face carved in grim lines.

“Jack, stop. Think.” Cam’s hand hovered near his arm. “He knows what you are and yet he hasn’t even attempted to cover his tracks!”

Jack shook his head and forced himself to calm as his friend’s words pierced the fog of murderous rage around him. It was harder than it should have been. The cat wanted to hunt and kill. It had no interest in trying to reason. Cameron was right. Megan’s captor had to know Jack was capable of tracking him. So why had he not at least waded into the water? Instead his scent was blazing strongly through the trees where even the rain would take longer to wash it away.

That someone knew enough about his species to hunt mated couples and have them killed was incomprehensible to Jack. How did he find out? The implications for all shapeshifters should their existence be exposed were horrifying.

"He wants you to follow him, Jack." Cam dropped his hand to his side satisfied he had Jack's attention for now. "Otherwise he would have killed her here. He wants both of you."

Jack shifted his feet, his entire body tensed against the urge to find Megan. His sharp eyes scanned the shoreline and trees around them. "I have to go after her, Cam, he knows that. But he won't expect both of us. We have to be quick, it won't be long before I shift again and it will be out of my control."

* * * * *

Consciousness leaked back slowly. The first thing Megan became aware of was the pounding in her head. It felt like someone was ramming ice picks into her brain. Not that she'd ever actually had an ice pick rammed into her brain... She was lying on her side and her hands and feet were tightly bound. Memory flooded her and she blinked blurry eyes until her surroundings came into focus. Careful to move as little as possible, she let her gaze roam around her. It looked like an abandoned house. She faced an open door leading into another dim room and the floor beneath her was wood covered by a thin layer of dirt. Piles of leaves had gathered in the corners.

A spider scurried across the floor in front of her and she tried not to think about her unbound hair and what might crawl into it. Wallpaper was peeling from the walls in damp strips and the one window she could see was cracked and dirty. The battery-operated lantern on the floor next to a rolled-up sleeping bag and a backpack near the fireplace told her she was not alone. Nausea rose, thick and oily in her stomach and she fought it back. Was her kidnapper the person who had tried to kill them? She suspected she was about to find out as footsteps echoed through the doorway.

When he entered the room, Megan realized he had made no effort to conceal his appearance and he wasn't what she expected. Medium height and rail-thin, he looked around sixty years old with short steel-gray hair surrounding a bald patch on the crown

of his head. He was dressed in new-looking jeans and boots and a black nylon windbreaker, and looked like he could be someone's grandfather. Until she saw his eyes. A dark muddy brown, they were filled with such malice she instinctively shrank back against the concrete behind her.

"Ah, I see you are awake." His voice was frighteningly calm and there was something familiar about the cadence of his voice. "I am sure we won't be here long, your mate will be here soon." He took a gun from his pocket and sat it on the floor by the lantern. He was right, Jack would come after her and he would be walking straight into a trap. "Who are you?" she demanded, struggling up into a sitting position against the wall. "Tell me what you want with us!"

He didn't react to her questions, just continued talking in that soft tone. "Such a shame really, you were very young. A pretty young girl just like..." He paused and looked away, taking a seat on the top of his sleeping bag. "Well, they usually are, that's why I have to stop it." He fixed his eerie eyes on her again, peering at her with unnerving intensity before quickly shifting his gaze to a point just above her head.

"How much of your humanity is left, I wonder? He hasn't finished with you yet or you would not have succumbed so quickly to the chloroform." Suddenly Megan realized why his tone was so odd. He was talking to her like she was an animal! Somehow he knew about Jack. "Let me go!" She struggled against her restraints twisting her wrists and pulling against the coarse rope until her flesh burned but there was no give. All the while the old man continued murmuring at her. Infuriated, she shouted, "I'm not an animal, God dammit! Let me go!"

He was on his feet in an instant, towering over her. His face scarlet, eyes bulging from their sockets, he drew back a hand and hit her, knocking her to the floor. Spitfire flew from his lips and his eyes glowing with madness, he roared, "Do *not* take the Lord's name in vain! You are an *abomination*! Not fit to speak His name to me!"

He began to pace agitatedly. "I will succeed, Lord. You showed my path when the Demon took my daughter. I will see the souls these creatures pollute freed."

Megan struggled upright once more and watched, terrified. Tears streamed unchecked from her eyes and her face throbbed where the blow had landed and a trickle of blood ran from the corner of her mouth. "Bastard!" she spat at him.

He crouched next to the rucksack and extracted a capped syringe from a zipped pocket before walking purposefully back towards her. "He will be here soon, the trail was clear enough for him to follow. It's time." His calm was restored as if the outburst had never occurred. "I see now that once again He wishes His act of mercy to be carried out by my own hand." He smiled gently. "I'm going to send you home. The good Lord will cleanse your soul."

He's going to kill me.

Adrenaline flooded her system and her brain screamed at her. *Escape!* She started to shuffle away from him and he grabbed her with the same wiry strength he had subdued her with before. Megan screamed and cursed him with the fury of someone who *was* possessed. Avoiding her bound feet when she tried to kick at him, he rolled her onto her stomach and held her with his knee. The fight drained out of her when she felt the sharp sting of the needle as it pierced the flesh of her upper arm. Panting, she lay face down on the dirty floor, her arm stinging. His weight lifted from her and he hauled her roughly back to sit against the wall. She glared at him through the tangled, dirty strands of her hair. Her body ached with a new collection of bruises and her throat was raw but she didn't feel anything else. Yet. "What did you do to me?" she hissed.

He too was breathing hard when he sat back down. He ignored the question, picking up the gun instead and fixing his attention on the door. It didn't really matter. From his ranting she thought that whatever it was, he probably meant it to kill her. *I'm going to die.* Her thoughts went to Jack, and letting her head fall forward she closed her eyes and concentrated. He had said that picking up her thoughts was like listening to a badly tuned radio. With that in mind, she focused her thoughts and made sure her signal was as clear as possible. *Trap. Gun. Trap. Gun. Trap. Gun...* Over and over she

repeated the words in her mind in the hopes that Jack would pick up one or both and be warned.

Jack studied the derelict cottage through a screen of ferns and brambles. What had once been a cleared garden was now being gradually reclaimed by the woodland and Jack was confident that he couldn't be seen crouched in the tree line. He and Cameron had delayed long enough to collect waterproof jackets and a small safety rucksack Cam kept packed for when he hiked. It contained a first aid kit, torch, matches and a few other bits and pieces that came in handy in emergencies. The comforting weight of the handgun under his jacket was something else he had his friend to thank for. Jack had been grateful, but unsurprised when Cam had appeared carrying it and a hunting rifle for himself.

They had easily tracked Megan and her kidnapper around the loch and up the hill to the house, leaving no doubt in either of their minds that it was deliberate. As they had approached she had nearly knocked him on his ass with a forceful mental warning. It had still taken his friend's cool head to convince him not to charge ahead and into the house when they had gotten close enough. The relief of feeling her alive was shadowed by the knowledge that she was terrified and hurting. He swore to himself it wouldn't be for much longer.

Since only one of the rooms had four walls and a roof, they had decided this was the most likely place for him to be holding her. Cam was maneuvering into a spot where he could see into the room with the riflescope. Jack gave him a few minutes head start and drew his gun before approaching the building, staying clear of the cracked window.

The disturbing scent of the kidnapper was strong here and beneath it he felt Megan's fear and a trace of her blood. Sweat broke out on his brow as he fought for control and looked into the room. She was leaning against the wall, knees drawn up and shoulders hunched as though trying to make as small a target as possible. As if she

sensed his regard, her head lifted and she looked at him with frightened blue eyes. Tears had made tracks through the dirt on her bruised face and dried blood marked the corner of her mouth. Jack's hold on the cat slipped and he growled deep in his throat. Megan glanced to the other side of the room and back to him in a clear signal, confirming what his nose had already told him. He stepped across the threshold and looked into the eyes of a madman.

This, Jack realized, was what tainted the old man's scent and caused such a primal reaction in him. Megan was silent, her mind filled now with a jumble of images, her concentration broken. Reluctantly he closed her out and focused his attention on the man before him. The kidnapper stood easily showing none of the weaknesses his appearance suggested. His voice and face were emotionless when he spoke, "Drop the weapon."

Jack eyed the gun pointed at him and did as he was told, sliding his own weapon across the floor towards the door. He didn't need it, anyway. Moving slowly, he approached the fireplace, drawing attention away from his mate and snarled, "Why are you doing this?"

The blank expression cleared from the man's face and was replaced by determination. The gun twitched in his hand and he moved away from the wall in order to keep Jack in his sights. "The Lord has charged me with delivering you back to hell. I will not fail Him."

The light of true belief glinted in his eyes and even though he knew it would be pointless, Jack retorted, "We are not demons! What about the girl? She isn't one of us. Why are you punishing an innocent?"

"Your victims' souls must be freed from eternal damnation. They shall not suffer!" His voice dropped to a whisper. "I make sure they don't suffer. She didn't suffer."

Jack inched further around, slowly herding him into the center of the room "Who didn't suffer?" He watched the old man warily as he began reciting "The Lord's Prayer", his voice rising with every repetition. Drowning out anything Jack might say,

his finger tightening on the trigger of the gun. A trickle of sweat ran down Jack's spine and he prepared himself to take action.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Megan gather herself and knew she intended to pounce as soon as the kidnapper was in range. *Stay down. Don't move.* He heard her tiny gasp at the strength of his order but she didn't move. Instead she stated in a precise voice, "Your daughter was an innocent, too. When you killed her, you marked your own soul for damnation!"

"Lead us not into temptation!" The old man's face flushed and body trembling with rage, he took a step backwards and arced the gun around to aim at her.

"...Deliver us from evil!"

The words echoed off the bare rafters of the room, Jack saw the intention to fire flash across his face and leapt towards Megan.

"Move!"

His fingers grasped the front of her jacket and his knees connected hard with the floor. The blast of a gunshot filled the room and there was silence.

Jack raised himself up off of Megan's trembling body and onto his elbows. She glanced to the side at the still form of her kidnapper and her blue eyes met his.

"Amen," she whispered in a shaking voice.

Jack sat up, pulling her with him and freed her from her bindings with a small pocketknife. He hissed at the damage done to her wrists, bringing them to his lips and gently kissing the raw flesh. He brushed the tangled hair from her face and devoured her lips hungrily, relief rushing through him. Footsteps pounded and they broke apart when Cameron rushed through the door. Jack smiled, rising to his feet, and grasped his friend's arm. "What took you so long?!"

Cam grimaced and shook his head, "You did. It was your job to get him in range of the window. I was getting worried for a while there." Jack picked up the sleeping bag from the floor and unwrapped it, laying it over the body. Megan hadn't seemed too

worried about it yet, but once the shock had worn off it might be a different story. As if in confirmation, she said in a small voice, “Uh, guys? I don’t feel so good.”

Chapter Twelve

Jack looked at her. She was sitting against the wall, her eyes were closed and face chalk white. "We had to kill him, Megan. The man was beyond reason, there was no way he was letting us out of here alive. I've covered him up, you can open your eyes."

Her words were slurred. "You...you don't understand. He g-gave me something." Her eyes opened slowly and she scanned the floor, nodding at an empty syringe.

Jack knelt at her side, engulfing her in his embrace, adrenaline flooding his system. "Did he say what it was, baby?" She slumped against him and he tilted her pale face to his, alarmed by the sheen of sweat on her face and the dilation of her pupils.

She shook her head and pushed herself upright, scrubbing a hand over her face, "I'm so tired."

"Do *not* go to sleep yet, Meg. You hear me?" Jack glanced up as his friend let loose a string of curses.

The contents of the old man's bag were scattered on the floor and Cam held a glass vial in his hand with powder residue on the bottom. "It's a veterinary tranquilizer, Jack, the same one used to drug Paul Spencer and his wife two years ago. There is enough concentrated in this vial to kill a normal human." He threw the container against the wall, shattering it. "So unless you change her, he's killed you both anyway."

Jack jerked back as if his friend's words had physically hit him. He gathered his mate up in his arms and carried her out into the night air. The wooden porch was still quite sheltered and he sat with his back to the wall and held her on his lap. Cameron could still hear him out here, after all, his ears were every bit as sensitive as Jack's, but Jack knew he would do his best not to eavesdrop. At least they would have the illusion of privacy. Their time had been cut brutally short and he knew he would have to take the decision from her hands after all.

Megan struggled to throw off the insidious weariness that seeped through her body. She really was going to die. Adrenaline flooded through her system helping to stem the tide, she was not giving up without a fight. "What was he talking about, Jack?"

He looked at her, silver eyes filled with resignation and regret. "I can save your life, Megan, if we complete the blood exchange and I make you one of us."

He closed his eyes, pressed his forehead against her, and said fiercely, "I wanted to give you a choice, Meg, but I can't let you die."

Joy sparked within her and she lifted a leaden hand to cup his face. "I have chosen. I made my decision by the loch before I was kidnapped." He opened his eyes and lifted his head and a wary hope crept into his eyes.

"It's true. If you had been listening like you said you could, you would already know." She smiled lopsidedly at him and said, "Do it, Jack."

His pupils flared, eyes heating at her words and leaned forward and kissed her, the heated strokes of his tongue causing her sluggish heart rate to pick up. It amazed her that this man could turn her on so much with a simple kiss. She could feel him shaking as he drew back from her slightly, proving that she wasn't the only one affected. He fished in the pocket of his jacket and withdrew the little knife, quickly piercing the tip of her index finger. She hissed at the sharp pain and then moaned as Jack sucked her finger into the warmth of his mouth, caressing the small wound with his tongue.

"My turn." Megan took the knife from him, fumbling slightly. Unsure whether she was breathless as a result of what he was doing to her, or because her body was struggling against the tranquilizer. She repeated his actions, surprised that the taste of his blood in her mouth didn't disgust her as she thought it would. Instead she reveled in the intimacy of the act, knowing that it would bind her to Jack in ways she had never imagined.

The bleeding stopped quickly and with a final swipe of her tongue, she released him and lay back in his embrace, soothed by the thump of his heart beneath her ear. She

was exhausted, frighteningly so, and this time she knew her shallow breaths had nothing to do with arousal. "Jack? What happens now?"

He tightened his embrace and she felt him lift his shoulders. "Nothing. We wait, I suppose."

Megan considered the times she had seen Jack transform and tried to brace herself for the pain that was sure to rack her own body. With weakness already spreading through her, she wasn't sure how she would cope with it. Pins and needles tingled in her hands and feet and she shifted, trying to ease them, and unzipped her jacket to let the breeze cool her heated flesh.

Instead of easing, the tingling spread, up her limbs and through her body until even her scalp prickled. Megan realized abruptly that the transformation had started. Behind her, Jack gave a startled oath and the hand that had been behind her back appeared in front of her. Her mouth went dry as she saw that he too was beginning to change.

He lifted her from his knee. "Take your clothes off." She gaped at him and he began to strip her briskly. "If you don't get out of them now, they'll be ruined." Heat and strength radiated through her and the tingling sensation multiplied as she obeyed him and knelt on the rough wood planks. It didn't hurt. A fact Jack seemed to realize at the same moment she did. He lifted his startled gaze to her face. "There's no pain..." His voice was deep and rough in his throat. Feeling strangely lightheaded, she looked at her hands and saw that they had almost completely changed. Panic whispered through her so she closed her eyes and let her body take over.

Sounds suddenly assaulted her from every direction. Birds, rain, the wind shushing through the trees, Cameron moving around inside the cottage. She smelled the damp wood beneath her feet, the damp earth and grass and the tang of pine. A multitude of other scents and sounds surrounded her that she couldn't yet identify. Fascinated, she opened her eyes. Jack sat in front of her, five or six inches taller than her even in his feline form. In fact it startled her how much bigger everything seemed.

Megan looked down at herself and saw that like Jack she had midnight black fur and a sleek, muscular body. Though hers was more compact than his powerful build. She stood on wobbly legs and heard Jack's deep chuckle in her mind. *Are you all right?* She glared at him and bared her teeth giving an experimental growl and he laughed at her again. Wondering if the telepathy now went both ways, she threw a few curses his way. *Is that any way to speak to your mate, Megan?* Happiness radiated from him as he licked her muzzle and rubbed his cheek against hers.

A new smell reached her and she turned towards the scuff of booted feet. Cameron stood in the doorway and for a fleeting moment she thought she saw jealousy in his eyes. There and gone so quickly it was impossible to be sure. His grudging smile transformed his broodingly handsome face into a male model perfection that was wasted on someone who shut himself away. "Congratulations, Jack. Why don't you two head back to the house? I'll clean up here and bring your clothes." He seemed to sense Jack's reluctance and continued. "Go on, unless you'd like to eat the evidence?" Jack growled and Megan felt her ears flatten and her hair bristle at the idea. He laughed and walked back inside. "Didn't think so."

Megan turned and jumped off of the porch, landing lightly on her paws. A small animal scurried away through the undergrowth and she had the powerful urge to chase. Just to see if she could catch it, definitely not eat the poor little thing she assured herself. She turned back to the porch and saw her mate still staring after his friend. *Jack.* He turned and looked at her.

Come show me the woods.

He leapt down beside her. *Is that anything like come show me your etchings?*

Megan swiped a paw at him and bounded into the trees. *Maybe later.*

* * * * *

Megan wiped the steam from the bathroom mirror and examined the face reflected there. She didn't look any different. There was no bruise on her cheek, no swelling and her wrists were no longer marked by her struggles with her bindings. Apart from the dirt she had just scrubbed off in the shower, there was nothing to suggest the ordeal her body had just been through. Only the warm glow of Jack's presence in her mind suggested her life had been changed forever. The mind-link had surprised her, rather than feeling threatened by it, she found it comforting. At the moment she only heard things that her mate directed at her but she knew in time she would be able to sense his emotions and pick up his surface thoughts. Jack, on the other hand, was more adept but she had quickly found that by imagining a door between his mind and hers she could shut him out.

So this was it, the mystery had been solved, the bad guy was defeated and the hero and heroine had gone off into the sunset together.

Happy Ever After.

Except she knew her mate was still hiding things from her. Some of his behavior in the last few days just didn't add up.

Four feet, she had discovered, were definitely faster than two and it had not taken them long to reach Murray House. She would happily have spent a little longer in the woods...there were quite a few things she'd like to try in her new form. Megan flashed a grin at her reflection. Who'da thunk it? Jack, however, seemed to be in a hurry to get back.

When she had first asked him about shifting, he had told her he couldn't control it. Imagine her surprise when, upon reaching the wide lawn of the house, Jack had stepped back from her and after a few moments of concentration...shifted. Not that this was a bad thing. She was happy to know she might not change at random, as he had led her to believe. It just added one more thing to the list of secrets. Following his urging she too had reluctantly changed back. For the first time in her life, she had felt like a giant, clumsy and awkward, but after a few moments the feeling had faded.

Her mate had been jubilant, laughing loudly and throwing his arms around her. Caught up in his enthusiasm she had hugged him back and allowed him to carry her upstairs to their room. His hands had trailed all over her naked body, allegedly looking for injuries, but the heat in his eyes told a different story. They had both been aroused by the time they got there but instead of making love to her, he had placed her on the bed, kissed her gently and asked her to meet him downstairs. Then he had left her there. Aroused, frustrated and suspicious. Oh yes, he was definitely hiding something.

She dressed quickly in a clingy scoop-necked cotton top and an ankle-length skirt, not bothering with underwear since she had no intention of being dressed for long. She paused for a moment in front of the mirrored closet door and unbuttoned the row of buttons on the front of her skirt to just above her knee. Satisfied, she gave her reflection a nod. *Take that Jack Douglass...*and went in search of her mate.

Cameron threw his jacket over the back of an armchair and walked wearily to the cut crystal decanter on the side table. Jack watched as his friend poured a healthy shot of brandy and tossed it back with a grimace. The smell of pine and smoke overlaid the slight taint of less pleasant odors hinting at the lengths he had gone to for him. "Thank you."

Cam filled his glass again and faced him, expression serious. "I would have done worse." His gaze turned inward and Jack felt his sorrow. "I have done worse." He took another sip of his drink. "I found his identification and a few other personal papers in his bag..." His voice trailed off and both of them looked up as the door opened and Megan walked in.

His Dearbh Ceangal.

At first glance her white top and sky blue skirt looked modest enough but as she approached him he saw the way the top clung to her. Her bra-less state was obvious as her breasts swayed with her movements and her peaked nipples were outlined against the soft fabric.

No panties either... her voice whispered into his mind.

Jack's mouth went dry and every bit of blood drained out of his head and into his cock. She sat beside him on the leather sofa and crossed her legs, her bare foot grazed his calf and the long skirt parted to pool around her thighs. With a monumental effort, he dragged his eyes back to her face. Her cheeks were pink as she turned to his friend, ignoring him, and asked, "You were saying, Cameron?"

Jack didn't need to be able to read minds to see the desire in the other man's amber eyes as he stared at Megan with open admiration. A low growl escaped him and Cam glanced at him with amusement and cleared his throat. "His name was James York, he was a vet. Ann Spencer was his daughter." Megan looked at him questioningly and he relayed to her what he'd found out about the murders.

"We may never know how he found out what Paul Spencer was, but what worries me more is that he found out about others. He knew a lot about us, Jack. He had notes about the mating cycle. It's going to take some time but I'm going to try to find out where he got his information."

Megan's eyes narrowed dangerously and she looked at Jack and then back at his friend. "Mating cycle?"

With a less than sympathetic look on his face, Cam swallowed the rest of his brandy. "Don't look at me, I told him to tell you." He headed for the door, grabbing his jacket on the way. "Play nice, you two."

Jack barely heard his friend leave the room. He was too busy watching his very determined looking mate as she sat beside him, one eyebrow raised in silent scrutiny. "Meg, it was for your own good..." Her brows drew into a scowl. *Okay, not a good start.* "I told you most of this. I just left out a few details."

She continued to stare at him, this time a sheen of tears in her eyes. Jack developed sudden empathy with the men he had previously mocked for giving in to the power of their wives' silence. A little desperately, he filled in the facts he had neglected to tell her about how the mating cycle began and how it would have eventually ended if she had

turned him away. By the time he had finished, she stood with her back to him, she had shut him out of her thoughts and he was beginning to get a little worried. "I'm sorry I had to deceive you, Megan, but if I had to do it over I would do the same thing. I knew you wouldn't hesitate to bond with me if you knew what would happen. You are my Dearbh Ceangal, I love you... I couldn't accept less from you."

She turned back to him and his heart melted when he saw that the anger he expected was absent from her expression. Lord help him, this woman never reacted the way he expected. Life with Megan was going to be interesting. He started to go to her but she motioned him to stay where he was and knelt between his spread legs. Tears trickled down her cheeks as she said softly, "I love you, Jack." Her pale skin was blotchy and her nose red but Jack swore he had never seen a more beautiful face in all his thirty-two years. He wiped the moisture from her face with the pads of his fingers and leaned forward to kiss her. Megan, his mate, his heart, his life.

She returned his passion. Humming in renewed pleasure, her fingers grasped the edge of his sweater and pulled it over his head. She brushed her fingers lightly through the hair on his chest and down to unfasten his jeans. He lifted his hips so that she could pull them down. Groaning when she let his erection glide against her cheek.

She stood, and lifted her long skirt higher to slowly unbutton it and he caught glimpses of the neatly trimmed hair between her legs. He slid forward as she reached the final few fastenings and stilled her hands with his own. "Let me."

She nodded and while he undid the last to let her skirt pool around her ankles, she took off her top. Her firm breasts bounced slightly as she shook her unruly curls from her face. Jack sucked in a breath and just stared at her for a moment. "You're so beautiful. I love to look at you." He gripped her hips and pulled her closer rubbing his face against her soft abdomen and her hands went to his head holding him closer. He savored the smell of her arousal and blew gently on the curls concealing her mound.

She shivered against him, fingers tightening briefly in his hair. "I want you, Jack. I want your hard cock so deep inside me I don't know where I end and you begin." With gentle pressure, she urged him backward onto the couch so she could straddle him.

The supple leather of the couch was still warm from his body and Jack sat back into it without protest. Megan followed him and they shared another kiss, this one hungrier than the last, a melding of lips and tongues. She grasped his shaft with one hand and guided him into her body. Jack gasped, hips surging forward at the first touch of her moist heat until he was seated fully within her and they both cried out at the completeness of the union.

He waited, trembling, his forehead resting on hers, for her to adjust to him. She arched her back so that her breasts thrust forward and he laved and sucked her nipples until she whimpered and began to move. She took her time, rising up on her knees as far as she could without freeing him from the tight clasp of her body and sinking slowly back down. Her inner muscles tightened around his cock, increasing the pressure until she nearly finished him off. In desperation he gripped her hips and increased the pace, tilting her so that he stroked against that hidden spot deep inside her.

"Yes, God Jack! Again."

He felt his balls draw tight against his body in impending release and with one hand he reached between them and thumbed her clit. She cried out and her muscles clamped down hard on his cock, taking him over with her.

* * * * *

Jack woke in the early hours of the morning, his skin flushed and body hard with the desire that pulsed through him. Megan was sprawled over him, her head resting under his chin, a lock of curly hair tickling his nose. They had been too busy last night to shut the curtains and he could see the clear, star-filled sky outside had lightened to a dusky blue as the sun began to rise. He thought fleetingly about closing them but a

vision of Megan's creamy skin bathed in the golden morning light flashed across his brain and he reconsidered. Megan stirred and her hand caressed his chest in lazy circles.

Jack began to purr and he felt her smile against him. Resigned to the fact that the annoying habit was here to stay, he ignored it. It made her happy. For the first time in a long while he felt as if his body was his own again and if he had developed a few new habits to go with it then that was fine. The feeling he had when he had discovered that he was able to shift back from his feline shape was indescribable. Instead of draining him, the transformation had energized him. His father had been right when he had said things would change when he and the cat merged. He thought about Megan's playful teasing in the woods as they had both made their way back to Murray house. His dad had been right about a lot of things, he decided.

Images from the dream flitted through his mind and he realized not all of them were his ideas. "Jack?" her voice was thick with sleep. "Is there something else you might have forgotten to tell me?" His hand drifted down her hip as he considered his reply and he smiled. "Well...there's this thing about our dreams coming true..."

Epilogue

Jayne Davis marched into her flat and slammed the door behind her. What a lousy damn day! She'd had another row with her boss after the little swine had come up behind her and brushed his sweaty little hand over her backside while she bent over to stock shelves. She'd restrained herself from hitting him, barely. She had, however, pushed him backward into some boxes. He had threatened to fire her, she had threatened to sue him for sexual harassment.

Stalemate.

He knew she needed the job and people who sued their bosses for sexual harassment wouldn't find another one very easily. All the same he didn't really want to risk forcing her hand. A good thing too because she'd definitely do it.

At the end of her shift, she had headed out into the wet windy day and her umbrella had blown inside out before she got to the end of the street. Valiantly she'd pulled her coat around herself and continued on anyway. Then she had an argument with an obnoxious and unhelpful store clerk who was reluctant to wrap the two boxes of books she had bought in plastic to keep them dry. That one too, was a draw. The clerk had grudgingly handed over the wrap and she had done it herself. A good thing, too, because when she stepped onto the pavement outside, a bus had driven through a puddle in the gutter and soaked her from head to foot. Even her shoes squidged.

Brushing her wet hair back from her face, she shrugged off her coat and set her packages down on the phone table. The answering machine light was blinking and she crossed her fingers and pressed the button, hoping that it would be Megan. She had worried about her friend since she left with the very mysterious and sexy Mr. Douglass.

"Jayne, it's me. I'm calling to let you know it's over and I'm safe." Jayne gave a small sigh of relief. "You would not believe what's happened to me since we left! But

first, congratulate me, babe, I'm getting married!" Jayne paused the tape and absorbed the impact of her friend's words. Megan was the only person Jayne had been close to since her family died. The idea that she was going to have to share her with someone else was bittersweet. "Jack wants me to meet his family, we fly out tomorrow. I'll see you soon, oh, and Jayne? Believe in the magic."

The End

About the author:

Cait Miller lives on the West Coast of Scotland in the same small town where she was born. She shares her home with a large collection of dragons and a miniature Yorkshire Terrier who has convinced the postman she's a Rottweiler. Cait dreams one day of living in a castle filled with history...or at least a house with a library.

Books and writing have played a huge part in Cait's life since she was very young. Encouraged by a mother with similar interests and one of the world's greatest English teachers, she began writing her own stories. Unfortunately she inherited a practical side to her nature from her grannie—who once told her at a party, in front of her teenage friends, to cross her legs not her fingers.

Cait went on to become one of the first people in her family to graduate from University where she trained for a medical profession. Writing became something she did for her own pleasure, never dreaming it could be anything else. Then, one day, she showed one of those stories to a group of online friends who taught her to Believe In The Magic...

If you are ever looking for Cait you only have to find the nearest quiet corner and she'll be there, book or pen in hand, wrapped up in another world.

Cait welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1337 Commerce Drive, #13, Stow, Ohio 44224.



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