

The book cover features a composite image. The top half shows a man's face in profile, looking down, with a background of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and a thatched roof. The bottom half shows a woman's face looking forward, with flames rising from the sides. The title 'Into the Air' is written in a large, white, cursive font across the middle, underlined. The author's name 'CAITLYN WILLOWS' is in a smaller, white, serif font below the title. The publisher's name 'Loose Id' is at the bottom center.

# Into the Air

CAITLYN WILLOWS

Loose Id

# INTO THE LAIR

Caitlyn Willows

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# Into the Lair

Caitlyn Willows

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# Loowis



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## Prologue

He watched from the shadows that dusk cast over the land. The cool San Diego night beckoned people to the Prentice Museum in droves. What better way to camouflage one's actions than in a crowd? The innocent and unwary wound their cars up the hill as the sun set; last rays glinting off the windshields made them look like diamonds.

Clouds in the distance hovered over the Pacific Ocean, teasing with the hint of thunderstorms that had yet to materialize. All they'd gotten during the day was sweltering August heat and humidity. Mother Nature had made up for it with a colorful display of purples, golds, and pinks against the clouds and the kiss of a cool breeze. It didn't matter. The atmosphere was heavy with desperation and foreboding. He would have felt it in any weather.

His nostrils flared as they arrived. The perfect couple -- young, intelligent, beautiful...irresistible. Tonight would be the night they'd be marked. He could smell the hunt hovering in the air. It was woven with the scent of the woman's pussy, punctuated by the testosterone cloud hovering around the man.

He stroked the erection thrusting up insistently before him....and wanted them...wanted his life back. And they were going to help him achieve all of that.

This time, no mistakes.

## Chapter One

Chillbumps dotted Lauren Garner's skin. Her stomach tightened with the creepy-crawly feeling someone was watching her. She'd felt that way since she and Sebastian had arrived at the Prentice Museum. Which was ridiculous, because they were the guests of honor. Naturally, all attention was on them.

But this...this was different. More like *something* was watching, not *someone*.

She clutched her husband's strong forearm and stretched to her tiptoes. He smiled when her breath caressed his ear.

"I need to go to the ladies room," she whispered. "Come with me...please."

He gave her a single nod and lifted his champagne flute to the ladies surrounding them. "If you'd all excuse us for just a minute..." He set the glass on the tray of a passing waiter, cupped Lauren's elbow, and steered her toward the restrooms down the far corridor beyond their exhibit.

"What's wrong?" he asked when they'd gotten out of earshot.

"I feel 'off.' Nervous. On edge. Like I'm being watched."

"Of course you're being watched." His voice deepened, falling over her like a sensuous caress. "You're the most beautiful woman in the room. Every man wants you. Every woman wants to be you."

She turned into him and ran her fingers beneath his tuxedo jacket, felt the hard chest beneath. "Only because those women want you."

"Mmmm..." He twisted open the door to the handicapped restroom and gently pushed her forward, locking it behind them. "Do you know how much I want to fuck you right now? I've had a killer of a hard-on since we walked into the place."

"Are you sure that's not just nervous energy?"

He grabbed her hand and placed it on his cock. "Does that feel like nervous energy to you?"

Her pussy clenched with want. Moisture soaked the cotton liner in her pantyhose. That's what she needed -- him. Now!

"I can't let you go back out there like that, now can I?" Hiking up her silky black dress, she grabbed the waistband and peeled her pantyhose down and off one leg.

Sebastian didn't hesitate. One hand freed his erection while the other hoisted her bare leg up and around his waist. Lauren braced herself against the sink, gasping when he impaled her. His fucking was raw, hard, fast...and just what she needed. All she could do was hold onto his massive shoulders for dear life.

He reached between them and pushed her clit against his cock. Each stroke raked over it, pulling her tighter and tighter. Orgasm rolled over her sweetly, relaxing those tense muscles, scattering her unease. He seated himself on a hard thrust and grunted with his release. They stood there for long minutes, draped around each other in the wonder of the moment.

"We really need to get back out there." He squeezed her ass and carefully slid free.

Lauren laughed to herself. The last thing they needed was a semen stain on his dark tux or her dress.

Using wet paper towels, they cleaned up quickly.

"You okay now?" he asked as he tucked in and zipped up.

Lauren smiled and kissed his chin. "More than okay. It was just what I needed. You go on. I need to pee."

He captured her lips in a kiss, then winked, wiped her lipstick off his mouth, and left.

Lauren locked the door behind him, laughing at that earlier creepy feeling. She was on edge, that was all. Nothing like an orgasm to settle a girl's nerves.

She took care of her personal needs and fixed her makeup. The biggest night of their lives and she was in the bathroom having sex.

"Mom would be so proud."

She might look killer-hot, but she felt like a freaking Barbie doll. And these pantyhose were smothering her.

"Screw it." She peeled them off and tossed them into the trash. Of course, that also meant she was now bare-bottomed.

Wearing panties might have helped. It was one of her greatest conundrums. Panties with pantyhose? She'd always considered it redundant. If they were pantyhose, why wear panties? Out of all the things she'd ever discussed with girlfriends, the topic had never come up. Sebastian was worthless on the subject. The fewer clothes she had on, the better he liked it.



“Like anyone will notice.” The focus was supposed to be on the artifacts on display.

Clutching her tiny purse, she swung open the door and left. At the end of the corridor, she felt the first trickle make its way down her thigh. She did an abrupt about-face back to the ladies room to sop up the remnants.

Sebastian’s knowing smirk greeted her when she finally returned to the exhibit wing. He lifted his glass in a private toast. Lauren snagged a crystal champagne flute from the tray of a passing waiter and followed suit, giving him a knowing smile of her own.

Content once more, Lauren sipped her golden champagne. It was light with a hint of sweet, not too dry; the perfect complement to what she hoped would be a perfect event.

She twirled the glass between thumb and forefinger and wandered toward her favorite of all the Maya artifacts she and Sebastian had unearthed in the last two years. Restored and on display in all its glory, the blue-green jade idol gleamed as it had when first carved. The phallus was an eye-popping ten inches long and three inches in circumference, jutting out from the proud figurine that bore it -- the envy of every woman at the exhibit.

The artist had shown intricate attention to detail, using the stone to its full potential. Veins of gold naturally running through it became veins of the idol’s penis. There was a slit in the glans with precum at the tip and no hint of foreskin, which made it extra unique considering its age. The scrotum was wrinkled and full, close to the body. Fingernails and toenails were present, musculature well defined, as were eyes, ears, nose, and the sloped Maya forehead prevalent for the culture at that time. The artist had even managed to capture the male’s grimace of pre-orgasmic pleasure.

The idol was made for grasping. Inspection had revealed ancient fingerprints over it, which they’d meticulously documented before cleaning. Lauren could appreciate its being well used. Once in the place it was intended, the idol looked guaranteed to provide extreme pleasure. The hilt would nudge a woman in just the right spot. A skilled lover could manipulate it to perfection, or the lady could ride the sucker like a horny cowgirl and get herself off easily.

Lauren would be lying if she’d said she wasn’t tempted to try it out -- no matter how many thousands of years old it was. At those times when she thought no other members of her archaeological team were looking, she’d unwrap the statue from its protective nesting of straw and caress the bulbous head, stroke the massive erection...and wonder.

She drew in another sip and studied the gathering. Clumps of people crowded around the Maya artifacts, oohing and ahing over it all. There was still a wealth of material trapped beneath the Yucatán soil. The problem was finding enough capital to continue the dig, and then getting back to the site before poachers took it all. Hence the exhibit of what they’d found to date.

It’d come as a surprise to them that funding was an issue. Until now the Braden Institute had been known and revered for its deep, never-ending pockets. To discover otherwise was a bit...unsettling. When the digging season ended in the Yucatán, she and

Sebastian were informed there would be a showing of their discoveries to date. That was six months ago, and they'd been working nonstop in preparation for it since then. At some point money was mentioned, and the exhibit became a fund-raiser while the rest of their team waited, bags packed and ready, to return to the site and continue. And the clock was ticking. She and Sebastian felt more pressure than ever. Their dig crew was depending on them.

Considering the crowd milling about, Lauren had to admit the exhibit seemed a rousing success. Barry Page darted through the guests like a cartoon ferret OD'd on espresso.

She bit back a laugh. Barry did look like a cartoon ferret -- dark hair slicked back, pointed nose leading the way, bug eyes never still as they searched out the next target. No one pursued funding for the Braden Institute more aggressively than Barry. But with each day that passed, he became a bigger pain in the ass. If she heard him say, "It takes money to make money," one more time, she'd pop his head off.

From the beginning, she'd been more than reluctant to do this fund-raiser. Barry's aggressive pursuit of contributions made her more so. She didn't like crowds, and she didn't like being the center of attention. Plus, the mere thought of leaving the quiet haven of field work made her nervous. She hadn't worn a dress, much less high heels, since she married Sebastian five years before. And dressing up for Sebastian meant Dockers and a pullover shirt.

*But, man oh man, look at him tonight.*

In his black tux he looked good enough to eat. Lauren wasn't sure who got more attention -- Sebastian or her well-endowed jade friend. Considering some of the obvious touching going on, Lauren wondered if Sebastian shouldn't have been sealed in security glass like the artifacts. Other than their dash to the restrooms, neither of them had spent a second alone since they walked into the exhibit wing. Everyone wanted to press hands with the couple who'd made the discovery -- archaeology's new rising stars.

Lauren wasn't sure how true that was, but it was definitely a huge career boost for them. And any notoriety that helped them continue their work was fine with her. Obviously, the institute felt that way as well. Once word got out about the artifacts, the Prentice Museum offered to display them and provide the level of security necessary to protect them during their stay. Liam Prentice had spared no expense. Why he didn't just donate the money to the dig and leave it at that...

She assumed the man had an agenda of his own. Didn't everyone? Considering tonight's success, the Prentices would be the talk of the town for months to come, if not years. That talk would generate more visitors to the museum. More visitors meant more money, more investors for him. She couldn't fault a person for that; after all, wasn't that exactly what she and Sebastian were doing tonight?

Lauren took another sip of champagne, smiling as Sebastian laughed at something a matronly redhead half his height and twice his width said. Damn, he was handsome. His skin was golden from years in the Yucatán sun. *All except his cute, milk white ass.* His dark

brown hair was trimmed neatly for a change, rather than straggly from one of her field haircuts. Those deep brown eyes sparkled, like he was having the time of his life. No one would guess he was as nervous as she was about all this.

His long fingers cradled the crystal flute. Every so often he'd absentmindedly brush his thumb along the side, reminding her of how often they played against her breast. Need curled into her belly at the thought. After ten years they were still going strong. She prayed they never grew tired of each other.

Sebastian's gaze shifted her way. His smile deepened into that I'm-going-to-fuck-you-until-we-both-collapse look. She swore he could will her clothes to drop with that hot glance. And they'd just had a quickie!

*Wait 'til he finds out I'm bare-bottomed.*

Would he scold her for being a "naughty girl" and promise a spanking later? Haul her off to the first available storage closet and give her some more quick and thorough loving? Either and both sounded good to her.

"I can remember when my wife used to watch me with hungry eyes."

Lauren glanced up at the man beside her. She'd been so absorbed in thought she hadn't noticed his approach, but she had no trouble recognizing Liam Prentice. Those sky blue eyes alone made him memorable. Silver blended nicely with the blond, making his hair look like precious metals had been spun there. From what she'd heard, he had the personality to back up those distinguished looks, too. He and his wife, Viola, were charming, wealthy, connected, and damned good-looking. Lauren hoped she and Sebastian were as lucky when they hit their fifties.

"Mr. Prentice, a pleasure to meet you. I'm Lauren Garner." She offered her hand to him.

He didn't hesitate. A handshake said a lot about a person. His wasn't a condescending girly squeeze, or a bone crusher. He shook her hand like a colleague, someone he respected.

"Your reputation and that of your husband's precedes you, Mrs. Garner. Everyone is talking about you." His gaze never left hers. She wasn't sure if she appreciated his directness, or found his steady perusal unnerving.

"Lauren...please...and thank you. It's wonderful to know our work means so much to others."

"Probably more than you realize. Viola and I had the chance to tour the exhibit privately this afternoon. What amazing discoveries. We're in awe of your accomplishment."

Coming from a man of his caliber and deeds, it was quite a compliment. "Thank you, Mr. Prentice. I'm honored you feel that way. I don't know what to say."

"First names with us as well, Lauren. Viola and I aren't much on pretense. We leave the snobbish displays to some of our so-called friends."

Lauren fanned her fingers at the base of her throat and laughed.

Liam leaned closer, humor dancing in his eyes. "If they only knew what we really thought of them."

"Somehow I suspect you don't waste a lot of time with them, though." And he most probably let others do his dirty work if he was displeased. He struck her as the type of man who would smile in your face, then order your head on a platter behind your back.

"Very perceptive, Lauren." He tapped her shoulder. "I knew I'd like you the instant I saw you across the crowded room."

Lauren sipped her champagne as she fought the urge to give him a playful push. "Now, Liam, that almost sounds like the beginning of a very bad pick-up line."

He tossed back a contagious laugh. "It really does. I'm so sorry. I've been watching your and Sebastian's work for so long, I feel like I know you."

Lauren was at a loss for words. She and Sebastian knew who the Prentices were -- only a hermit living in a time warp wouldn't -- but they hadn't thought much about the couple until this exhibit.

"Now you're going to think Viola and I are stalkers." His eyebrows scrunched together with what looked like regret. "Please don't. We've continued to follow archaeological discoveries after we left the field, even built this museum to help display them. We certainly can't begin to rival what the Braden Institute offers, but we do like to help fund those few scientists we find to be extraordinary -- like you and Sebastian."

Was he saying what she thought? That he was ready to fund their dig? She forced herself to retain some level of professional demeanor and not squeal...or get too far ahead of herself.

"Again you have me at a loss for words."

"Then I'd say it's the perfect time for you to tell me firsthand about your discoveries, starting with this intriguing little statue behind you. Although calling it little is definitely a misnomer."

Lauren felt her cheeks heat. Her comfort level nosedived.

"I'm sorry. I did it again." He cupped her elbow, gave it a quick squeeze, then swept his arm out. "Come meet Viola. Looks like she's already waylaid your husband. It's the perfect time."

Lauren glanced in Sebastian's direction. Viola Prentice had his attention, every word and action monitored by the throng growing around them. She matched Liam in looks, though hair dye most probably hid her gray. Both were fit and trim. Her calves looked like she was used to walking, well-defined with no hint of fat. Lauren couldn't tell if her legs were really suntanned, or if that was merely the color of her pantyhose. In either event, it was too dark a color and the one thing about her that was unbecoming.

She wore a black dress like every other female there -- understated elegance in the silk fabric that hugged her slender curves. An omega necklace gleamed around her throat,

matching bracelets flashed around her wrists from under her long sleeves. More gold shone from her earlobes. She wore the jewelry like it was an extension of herself, like a queen. It was hard not to compare herself to the older woman. Sebastian's smile her way told her she measured up just fine.

"Ah, yes, more hungry eyes," Liam said with a laugh. "If only to be twenty years younger..."

She smiled up at him. "And know what you know now?"

"Exactly." He added a nod and lifted his hand to his wife. "Viola, dear, quit hogging our good-looking friend and let the Garners give us a detailed tour of everything."

Viola turned a sultry smile Liam's way.

"Talk about hungry eyes," Lauren muttered to him.

"Indeed." Liam beamed. "Maybe your and Sebastian's influence is rubbing off on us. One can only hope."

\* \* \* \* \*

Damn, Lauren was killer hot tonight in her little black dress and come-fuck-me black heels. Their quickie in the restroom hadn't kept his erection away long. All he had to do was glance her way, think of those high-heeled legs tossed over his shoulders, and he was hard again. He couldn't wait to leave this agonizing event and go home.

Though he tried to hide it, Sebastian had never felt more out of his element. He smiled, shook hands, engaged in mindless chit-chat...which he discovered was fairly easy if you could get the other person to talk about themselves. All he had to do then was smile or laugh or nod at intervals, answer a few questions.

While guests crowded him with mindless chatter, Sebastian focused on Lauren's collarbones. On how her skin would taste when he'd trace his tongue over them. On how she'd sigh with pleasure and stretch her tight body against him. On the brush of her floaty hem against shapely legs. He couldn't wait to peel her naked and feel her quiver beneath his touch. Couldn't wait to see her surprise, hear her laughter, when she saw the present he'd had made especially for her.

There wasn't a woman in the room who compared to Lauren, and Sebastian had seen every one of them close up...with the exception of Viola Prentice.

The Prentices were their benefactors for this event, though they'd never met. The institute arranged everything, with specific instructions that the Garners were to extensively woo them in the hope they'd help fund the dig. Sebastian and Lauren weren't stupid. They knew a good thing when they saw it, but neither of them appreciated the added pressure. Pressure made more intense when the Prentices weren't here when the Garners arrived.

Barry Page had nearly had a coronary over their absence. His heaved sigh of relief was a little too obvious when the Prentices made a quiet entrance thirty minutes later. They'd

paused for a second, scanning the gathering. Body language said a lot about them, how close the two were -- his arm around her back, her standing in the cove of his body. Sebastian liked to see that in a couple who'd been married a long time. It was like a glimpse of what he hoped he and Lauren would have in twenty-five years -- still crazy in love, still so hot for one another the kindling could be used to start a fire.

A smile had sent the Prentices on separate paths, weaving into the crowd after they'd snagged champagne flutes from a passing waiter. Barry had wasted no time nailing Sebastian with a look that clearly told him to corner Liam Prentice. Sebastian promptly ignored it.

Barry was great at his job, but there was a time and place, and attacking Prentice the second he walked in the door wasn't it. Sebastian had too much professional respect for Prentice to do that. After all, Prentice had paid for this event, donated a portion of his museum with extra security, even added the draw of champagne, open bar, and heavy hors d'oeuvres buffet on the patio. He deserved Sebastian's and Lauren's thanks, not to be hit up for more money. Sebastian planned to do just that once Lauren finished her quiet perusal of her Mr. Happy idol...and Sebastian could politely slip away from the redhead's lengthy story of a bout with Montezuma's Revenge on her one trip to Cabo San Lucas twenty years ago. His brain shut down amid her graphic descriptions of all the barfing and pooping she'd done. His smile frozen in place, all Sebastian could do was nod while he prayed for an opening to excuse himself.

Then he saw Liam Prentice approach Lauren. The gaggle of people perpetually gathered around Sebastian parted at the same time. The redhead's rambling dissertation screeched to a halt the second Viola Prentice stepped forward, her smile open and welcoming. She was a striking woman, gracious in the face of the power she possessed yet didn't flaunt here.

Sebastian thrust his hand her way. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Prentice."

She slipped warm fingers into his, grasping them firmly as she edged closer. "The pleasure is mine. Please...first names. It makes life so much more pleasant. I read a story once about an elderly woman named Mary Grant. She was asked if there was anything she missed most, having reached ninety-five years. She responded that no one ever called her by her first name anymore...always 'Mrs. Grant.' I never want to be in that position or put others in it."

Sebastian could appreciate that, though he'd never considered it before. "Then first names it is, Viola." They dropped hands on a simultaneous nod. "My wife and I would like to express our sincere thanks for all you and your husband have done."

"We should be thanking you." She motioned to the displays like Vanna White turning letters. "This is a breathtaking find. Makes me crave to go out in the field for one last hurrah."

"From what I've heard, you and your husband were quite a force thirty years ago, amassing a nice resume of spectacular finds." Then they'd retired to the estate those discoveries, and an immense inheritance, had built.

"Viola, dear, quit hogging our good-looking friend and let the Garners give us a detailed tour of everything," Liam called out, interrupting her from any reply she might have made.

"An excellent idea." She gave her husband a sultry smile, then turned to Sebastian. "Shall we?"

"It would be my honor." Sebastian offered his arm to escort her. Viola wasted no time looping her hand through it.

"You and your wife make a striking couple," she said as they strolled in that direction.

He gave a soft laugh. "Thank you. I was thinking the same thing of you and Liam when you walked in."

Laughter bubbled out of her. "Oh, goodness...it's nice to know we've still got it after all these years. I imagine Lauren was excited for the chance to dress up for a change."

Her comment nearly brought him to a halt. Viola must have noticed he faltered because she put her other hand over his arm and squeezed.

"Look how breathtaking she is." Her gaze slowly swept over Lauren, appraising, comparing, judging. If Viola had been a man, Sebastian would have called it lecherous. "She's probably thinking the same about you, judging from the lust in her eyes. Most men bitch about the monkey suit, but there isn't a man alive who doesn't look devastating in a tux. Fires up those juices. Don't get me wrong...being able to work together day in and day out is wonderful. But being away from the grind, the grit of field work... Well, that sort of thing grows old after awhile, and we women do like a bit...more."

Sebastian's feel-good disappeared. Is that what Lauren wanted...more? For the first time in their ten-year history, he wondered if he'd somehow let her down. She never said. In fact, she'd seemed happy to be digging for past civilizations...didn't she?

He took a mental step back. What had he given her? Other than their professional accolades, they had nothing to speak of. Most of the money they earned was tucked away in savings and investments, hoarded for a rainy day. They had a small apartment that was more for storage than for living. They lived out of suitcases. Correction...backpacks, duffel bags, and crates. He'd had to rent the tux, which was the norm for most men. But Lauren didn't own pantyhose, much less a nice dress and heels, and she hadn't been too thrilled with the idea of having to shop for those items.

Sebastian smiled her way. Seeing her killer hot took his breath away. Her long brown hair drifted down her back, gold highlights catching the light. He wanted to comb his fingers through it over and over again, mine it for gold while his cock bored a tunnel into her cunt.

Sparkly rhinestones dangled from her ears, begging him to nibble. He found himself wishing he had given her diamonds, instead of a canvas tent in a sweaty jungle.

Odd how Viola's innocent comment could knock him off-kilter and spark doubt. Now that the seed was planted...

He extended his hand to Liam Prentice as they approached. "Sebastian Garner, it's a pleasure to meet you, sir." He kept his smile bright, hoping it would dissipate his unease.

"Trust me," Liam said. "It's *my* pleasure. Everything you've uncovered...amazing. A lot of hours. A lot of hard work."

"Definitely." Viola extended her hand to Lauren. "I feel I know you so well through your work that I should hug you."

"One can never have enough hugs," Lauren said with a smile.

"My feeling exactly!" Viola tossed her arms around Lauren's neck with no further warning.

Sebastian saw Lauren's eyes widen with surprise. Clearly she wasn't expecting Viola to carry through with such an exuberant embrace. All she could do was laugh with her and return the affection. As they parted, Lauren gasped and pressed her fingers against the curve of her neck.

"Oh, dear," Viola tsked, "it looks like the catch on my bracelet scratched you. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay...really." Lauren glanced at her fingers. It was all Sebastian could do to not pull her hair aside to see the scratch for himself, especially when the smile she gave the other woman didn't quite reach her eyes.

"See? No blood." Lauren lifted her fingers to show them as if to back up her words. "If it's visible, my hair should hide it. No harm, no worries."

The glance she gave Sebastian begged him to not make a big deal out of it. Though he agreed, giving her a slight nod, he still didn't like it.

"Still..." Viola unlatched the heavy gold bracelet and shoved it deep into Liam's trouser pocket. "There...that's that. Now," she looped her arm through Lauren's. "Tell us everything. I want to hear about every speck of dirt you brushed away to find these treasures."

Liam touched his wife's shoulder. "Not every speck, dear. I believe they're ready to open the buffet."

Viola cast a worried frown toward the double doors leading to the large glass-enclosed patio. "A quick tour then." She flashed him a smile and turned Lauren toward the exhibits.

Liam gave him a palms-up shrug that said, "What can a guy do?"

Sebastian smiled with his nod, and they fell in step behind the women. Barry tracked every movement. Sebastian hoped to hell he kept his distance. He and Lauren needed this moment, and not for the potential money it would bring. They needed the break from the



crowd, to be able to talk quietly about their discoveries and not the mindless garble they'd had to spew since they'd arrived.

Hands clasped behind him, he was content to let Lauren take over the tour. She had a sweet tone to her voice that could mesmerize howler monkeys, squalling children, hysterical females, and rampaging men...all at the same time. One-on-one, Lauren was excellent. She froze up when she had to give group presentations, though. Just the thought of standing behind a podium made her sweat. Teach, yes. Lecture, no.

They'd finished the circuit as the caterers were opening the doors to the patio. Sebastian hated the idea of going back into schmooze mode. Judging from Liam's resigned sigh, he did, too.

"What's the term? 'Into the breach'?"

Viola giggled. "Is it such a burden to be polite?"

"Sometimes," he said with an overdramatic sigh. "Especially when we're having such a great talk."

"Come on." Viola looped her arm through Liam's and tugged him toward the patio. "I'm sure we can worm a private table for the four of us from the Mother Hen."

Sebastian tried his best to cover his laughter with a cough into his fist. It was impossible. The description of Barry was too accurate.

Liam smirked. "Has he made your life a living hell?"

Lauren squeezed her arm around Sebastian's waist, silently reminding him of his manners. "He's just doing his job," she said.

He conceded the point with a nod. "And he does do it very well, no arguing there. But Viola and I know how annoying it can be to be yanked from your element and displayed like show dogs."

"Well, we won't lie about that," Lauren said. "It's been awkward and tense."

"And only the beginning, from what we've been told," Sebastian added. "If we want to continue doing what we love."

Liam pulled in a deep breath through his nose. "What if I were to offer you a solution?"

Sebastian wasn't sure how to respond to that. It sounded like Liam was saying he was going to fund for the dig. But it couldn't be as easy as all that?

"What type of solution?"

Liam paused for a sip of champagne, then smacked his lips. "Viola and I are putting together a unique expedition. We'd like you two to join us. We feel you'd mesh well with us and the rest of the potential team."

"And how would that be a solution?"

He was glad Lauren had asked that question. Sebastian had a dozen more running through his head.

Liam smiled. "Join us for the weekend, and you'll see. Others will be there, too. Acquaintances of yours, I believe. No strings. I'll lay out the plan then. You have nothing to lose, and at the very least, you would have had a couple of days to relax away from our friend before returning to your dig."

Fortunately, Liam didn't use the spiel "you have everything to gain." If he had, Sebastian might have walked away.

"I'm...intrigued," he finally said.

"Hopefully we can keep you that way." Liam grinned and hoisted his glass. "Come on. Let's eat before the herd decides to stampede."

Sebastian tucked his arm around Lauren's waist as they followed the older couple out. That's when he realized...

"You're not wearing your pantyhose," he whispered against her ear.

A pink flush colored her cheeks. "I'm not wearing any panties either," she whispered back.

Now he had two intriguing possibilities to think about.

## Chapter Two

They could call it a patio all they wanted, but all Lauren saw was another room. A rain forest canopy had been painted on the vaulted ceiling. The white rope lights crisscrossing along the beams even managed to look like they'd been woven through branches. Though beautifully done, it felt dead to Lauren. Where was the life, the breeze, the sound?

Floor-to-ceiling windows were the three outer walls, giving a teasing view of the meditation garden beyond. But you couldn't reach it. Access was through a locked door presently guarded by a hulk of a black man in a security uniform. Lauren couldn't help the nagging feeling that guards were poised to keep people from leaving until Barry decreed they could do so. Price of egress: a healthy donation to the dig.

Lauren followed the Prentices through snaking tables laden with silver chafing dishes, mindlessly putting one tidbit after the other on her plate. She felt closed-in, trapped like a caged animal.

Anxiety raced her blood where seconds before it had been the temptation of naughty sex with Sebastian that had done so. Telling him she was sans panties now felt like a cruel tease, just like the look-but-don't-touch foliage outside was blocked from human interaction.

"Are you okay, honey?"

Sebastian's voice close to her ear cut through Lauren's rising panic.

"I..." She glanced up at the fake ceiling. How could she tell him the place creeped her out when the owners were standing beside her? "I suddenly don't feel well."

"I'm not surprised. I don't think you've had much to eat today. Champagne, empty stomach, not a good match. Go sit down. I'll take this." He slipped her plate from her hand as he motioned his head toward their seats.

A rush of heat swamped her when Lauren took a step in that direction. Nausea and dizziness quickly followed. She managed to shake it off and slipped into the chair at their

designated table. Sebastian was right. She hadn't eaten. Barry's constant nagging had her nervous and on edge. She should have left the champagne alone, but holding the glass had given her something to do with her hands. Sipping it once she had it was second nature.

Sitting down helped, plus she could finally feel cool air against her skin. Looking around the room once more, she had to admit it *was* beautifully done -- meant to entertain the eye and transport visitors to another world.

Their table was near the podium and wall-size plasma screen. Shimmering black glass walls obscured the light from the interior of the museum. The shimmer was actually a curtain of water trickling down.

She shifted her gaze to the buffet line. Her mouth watered, her stomach growled -- both much better feelings than wanting to puke. Sebastian and the Prentices were nearly to the end, chatting like they'd been friends for years. It was like that with some people -- instant camaraderie. Lauren wanted to believe it was real now, but Liam's talk of them joining his unique expedition did rouse her suspicions. Were the Prentices being friendly because they wanted something, or because it was in their nature?

She gave a small snort. The Prentices could very well be thinking the same of them. After all, this was a fund-raiser.

"What's wrong?"

Lauren jumped at the sound of Barry's voice so close. He'd invaded her space by slipping into the vacant chair beside her.

"Why aren't you over there with Sebastian?"

Lauren leveled her most lethal stare at him -- one reserved for the occasional airheaded intern. "In case you haven't noticed, we aren't conjoined twins. Both of us are free to move about at will."

"But the Prentices are over there." His thin lips barely moved as he pushed out the words.

"And in a moment they'll be over here. I wasn't feeling well and --"

He snapped his hand over her forearm. "What's going on? What's wrong?" Barry's cartoon eyes bugged out all the more. "You're not pregnant, are you? God, tell me you're not pregnant. We'll never get this done right if you're pregnant."

She jerked her arm free. "What the hell is your problem?"

He had the good sense to put some distance between them. "We have a lot riding on this night."

"Don't you think we know that? We're not children. It's *our* careers, our reputations on the line." She thumped her fingers against her chest with each word she emphasized. "I'm sure you'll have no trouble finding a job elsewhere as a pain in the ass."

Barry's back stiffened. If he was waiting for her apology, he had a long wait coming. He'd crossed a major line with his pregnancy remark. Enough.

His cold gaze shifted over her shoulder. Lauren didn't turn to see who was there. The warm fingers that brushed her back told her it was Sebastian.

"Is there a problem?" The question came from Liam as he pulled out a chair for his wife. Viola nailed Barry with a glare that made him fidget.

"I was merely inquiring about Lauren's health. She looked a little pale."

It took willpower for Lauren not to reveal what he'd really said, but the Prentices were their benefactors this evening. No matter how much she disliked Barry and his tactics, she was determined to maintain professional decorum.

She brushed Viola's soft gasp of concern away with a wave of her hand. "It's nothing. I'd been too excited about tonight and neglected to eat properly. A glass and a half of champagne..." She turned her palms up in a shrug that had the others smiling...even ferret-face Barry.

"This should make you feel better." Sebastian placed a heaping plate before her. "Bring your energy level back up for the presentation. I can't do it without my staunchest supporter...and someone to laugh at my jokes." He added a wink and sat down beside her.

"By that time everyone should be too full and relaxed to move," she said with a smile. "We can blame their yawns on the open bar and not the slides we prepared." Though how anyone could fall asleep at one of Sebastian's lectures was a mystery. He put a lot of humor in with the information he hurled their way. It never failed to perk up a crowd. And only she knew how nervous he was whenever he did so.

She brushed her fingers up his thigh. He clasped her wrist before she reached his crotch, then pressed her fingers over his pulsing erection. Thank goodness the tablecloth hid the action.

"I think I'd like a private walk in the meditation garden before the lecture." He lifted a smile to the others. "Do you think that could be arranged? It'll help clear my head and let me get my thoughts in order."

Lauren tickled his sac, then slipped her fingers free and hid her smirk behind a crab-stuffed mushroom.

"I'll take care of that right away." Barry scurried off to do so.

"Annoying little man." Viola snapped her teeth closed over a zucchini spear.

"Very much so." Liam shot Barry a parting glare over his shoulder. "Hard working though he is, he grates people the wrong way with his...bravado. The institute might find they would have more contributors if he weren't coordinating this event."

Sebastian targeted a mini quiche and stabbed his fork into it. "It might be helpful if someone told the institute that."

Liam's grin chilled Lauren. "Oh...someone has."

She and Sebastian looked up to where Barry had dashed. Two security guards now flanked him -- the burly black genie and another one who could have been his Nordic twin.

Wyatt Caldwell, the head of the institute himself, had Barry cornered. Barry spared them a glance before he was escorted out. His dropped jaw matched Lauren's. She didn't know why she was surprised. Hadn't she assumed not thirty minutes before that Liam Prentice got others to do his dirty work for him? Here was clear proof of that assessment.

Sebastian curled his hot hand over her thigh. A squeeze reminded Lauren her mouth was open. She shoved a tiny Swedish meatball into it and chewed slowly. Wyatt Caldwell was now headed their way. His brown eyes looked amber in the dimmed light, liquid gold. She hadn't realized until this moment what a striking man he was. Each stride reminded her of a jungle cat -- sure, powerful, potentially lethal. It was sensual...addictive...mesmerizing.

She understood now why Sebastian enjoyed his company. The man drew people toward him, physically and mentally.

She felt Sebastian's fingers migrating upward and parted her thighs, opening her pussy to him. She needed his touch, now more than ever. All parts of her heated and pulsed, swelled and wept for attention. That private walk in the meditation garden was beyond tempting; it had just become a pressing need.

"Mind if I join you?" Wyatt bent down and kissed Viola lightly on the lips when she smiled up at him. Then he clasped Liam's hand and sat.

Now *that* was a power handshake if ever she saw one. Goose bumps ran up her spine. And Sebastian's questing fingers hit gold.

Lauren clamped her thighs closed, trapping his hand between them. Much more and she'd be coming where she sat. He gave her a little pinch, patted her thigh, then shifted his hand to the napkin on his lap.

"Glad you were able to make it, Wyatt." Napkin still clutched in place, he half-stood and extended his hand in greeting. A single grip and they returned to their seats.

"I wouldn't have missed it. Sorry a prior commitment kept me later than I'd planned, but it did allow me to take care of our little problem here." He leaned his forearms on the table. "It's quite a testament to your professionalism that you didn't tell me about this."

Lauren held her breath. Was he complimenting them or angry that he'd found out about Barry through a third party?

Sebastian seemed unconcerned, and merely gave him a nod. "The man was trying to do his job to the best of his ability and beyond. Lauren and I thought his obsessive compulsion to detail was directed at us. Had we even suspected his actions were jeopardizing the institute's goals, we could have said something."

Wyatt smiled. "Again, it says a lot about you two. I appreciate your discretion. All these months working side-by-side, all the hours we've spent together on the golf course, and not once did you steer conversation in a negative direction. It was nice to be able to relax for a change." A small sigh turned him toward the Prentices. "I apologize for it having gone on as

long as it did, but it enabled me and others to see the full extent of the situation. No one should doubt or question the outcome.”

Liam dotted his linen napkin at the corners of his mouth. “Understandable.”

Wyatt swiveled his head toward her and Sebastian. “Don’t worry that this leaves you stranded.”

Sebastian shrugged. “We’ll get a cab home.”

Barry had been adamant that he drive them to the museum. He wasn’t shy about his reasons for doing so either. He’d found their ten-year-old van less than show-worthy. Lauren would admit it wasn’t pretty, but it got them where they needed to go when they were in the country. Peeling blue paint didn’t matter. Barry felt differently. It was one of many reality jolts in their fund-raising experience.

“Nonsense.” The declaration came from Liam and Wyatt.

“Like minds.” Viola laughed, placing her hands on their arms. “As you can see, you’ll be well taken care of.”

“We had no doubt,” Sebastian said. “We appreciate the offer, but a cab is sufficient.”

“On a special night like this?” Liam cocked his head to one side. “As hard as you work, as much sacrifice as you two make, you should take advantage of this little luxury we can provide. You’ll ride in the limo with us. You deserve a little spoiling.”

“When you put it that way, how could we refuse?” Sebastian’s tone hinted otherwise. It felt like they were exchanging one watchdog for another.

“But I should probably warn you that Lauren and I turn into werewolves at midnight,” he told them.

Their laughter carried over the conversations around them.

Viola wagged her finger at him. “Now...if you’d said *chupacabras*, I might have believed you.”

“Different country, different creature. We like to blend in.” Humor lit Sebastian’s eyes.

His comment sparked more laughter. Heads turned. A few people wandered over, but the atmosphere had lightened with Barry’s departure...or maybe that was Lauren’s mood now that their taskmaster was gone. Stories were shared this time, not only about the Garners’ work, but others’ as well. She felt energized, alive, happier than she’d been since they’d been thrust into this crazy environment.

Sebastian was more relaxed as well. Tension melted from his face now that he didn’t feel he had to be “on.” He touched her frequently, sometimes a brush of his hand against hers, more often that exploratory path up thigh. Her breath caught each time he teased her clit with a promised touch, then stole it away at the last minute.

Every so often Wyatt turned a puzzled glance her way. Did he suspect what Sebastian was doing under the table? Could he see a flush in her cheeks? Notice the pulse throbbing

along her neck? Smell the arousal that dampened her thighs? That thought drifted to something more alarming -- had her juices puddled to her dress?

She should have left her pantyhose on. They would've absorbed some of the moisture.

Sebastian diddled his fingers over her. A half smile curved his lips when she sucked in a gasp. Come to think of it...fewer clothes were handy, too. But if there was a wet spot on the back of her dress...

"I see we have about thirty minutes until the presentation." Sebastian slipped his napkin into his trouser pocket and then pushed to his feet. "Lauren and I really need that private walk in the garden to order our thoughts before we start. I want to make sure her slides and notes mesh with my words."

"Not a soul will bother you," Wyatt said.

The men stood as Sebastian pulled her chair out. Without his hand bracing her elbow, Lauren wasn't sure her wobbly legs would hold her. He laced his fingers through hers. There was the briefest of touches as her hip brushed his crotch. His cock was hard, so hot she could feel the waves of heat through their clothes.

"Lead the way, sweetheart." His breath whispered over her ear.

Ripples of pleasure wiggled down her spine and curled around to lick at her clit. Lauren couldn't remember the last time she'd wanted him this badly...like she'd die if he didn't fuck her soon. Even the wild sex this afternoon before they dressed for this event didn't compare to the pounding lust compelling her to *hurry, hurry*.

Somehow she managed to thread them through the tables to the garden door. If anyone tried to waylay them to talk, Lauren didn't notice. Her focus was on the door, the garden, the privacy it offered, the aching need possessing her.

She thought the genie guard smiled as they neared. His large hand wrapped over the door handle, covering it completely. The rise and fall of conversation took on the cadence of a beating drum, matching each step they took. Genie thrust the handle down and swung the door open. Cool air kissed by the ocean beckoned her through, but there was no silence to go with it.

Lauren could still hear the muffled beat of drums. Behind the glass walls the guests' voices now sounded like chants with every tattoo that pulsed in her brain. Sebastian looped his arm around her waist, forcing her to slow her step even while he inched her dress up.

The winding cement path edged with low solar lighting took them beyond the view of others. Brass lanterns of different heights guided the way. The scent of hundreds of flowers and herbs danced on the air. A breeze tickled her now exposed ass. Sebastian raked his finger up and down the crack.

"Tsk, ts, ts. No panties," he murmured against her ear. "Bad girl."



A solid smack across her buttocks took Lauren's breath away and sent a gush of wetness trickling down her legs. It'd been forever since he'd done *that* to her. Suddenly, she wanted it more than she could bear.

He steered her toward a stone bench tucked beneath a sprawling oak tree. Perched at the highest point in the garden, Lauren could see the lights of San Diego twinkling below. Sebastian gave her little time to wonder over them. In seconds she was facedown over the bench, her fingers braced against the sweet smelling grass to keep her balance. She hoisted herself to her toes to keep her heels from sinking into the soft dirt, also giving Sebastian the perfect target.

Sebastian flipped her dress up to her shoulders and urged her legs wider apart. The scent of her arousal overshadowed that of the garden. Cool air licked at the sticky juices pooling at her crotch.

"Hmm..." He rubbed his hot hand over her butt cheeks. "I'd forgotten how enticing it is to have your cute little ass at my disposal. I can't remember the last time I gave you a good paddling."

An excited whimper squeaked from her throat. Her pussy clenched. Her clit throbbed. And she quivered there waiting...waiting.

"I wish there was time to give you a thorough spanking." He traced his fingers down the cleft and burrowed them deep in her cunt. "But there's always later...isn't there?" He pulled his fingers free and aimed for her asshole. "I said...isn't there?" He tunneled his fingers past the tight ring of muscle.

Lauren arched up on a moan. "Yes...God, yes."

"I thought so," he growled, and seated two fingers in her cunt, leaving the other two deep in her ass. "But a reminder might be in order. Ten spansks ought to keep your bottom warm until we get home, though I'd love to make it more so you squirm every time you sit. Imagine how swollen your clit will be afterward, waiting to come and come and come. So wet every man will smell...and want you."

She groaned again, pushing into the fingers that slowly fucked her. Sex with Sebastian had always been wonderful, but they worked so hard, with so many ears nearby, they never dared indulge when they were in the field. Oh, but the things they'd whisper to each other in the hot jungle night.

A hard smack on each cheek snapped her thoughts to her aching pussy. She clenched around his hand, riding him hard, lifting her butt for more.

Sebastian's chuckle rumbled over her as he popped her again. Her clit demanded touching. Lauren tried to wiggle her hand around. Two hard smacks forced her back down.

"I decide when you come, sweetheart."

“Oh, God!” she gasped out. The tone of his voice, the control he held... Her nipples were like rocks in her bra. She couldn’t catch her breath. Every drop of blood in her body had pooled to her crotch.

He spanked her some more. Harder, quicker. Lauren ground into him, choking back groans, fucking *him* now. He yanked his hand free, seized her clit between his fingers, and whacked her bottom over and over, well-beyond his preordained limit of ten. Orgasm burst through her, her limbs rigid as the explosion shook her. The climax left her spent, gasping for air. Lauren sagged like a wet noodle over the bench.

“No, you don’t.” Sebastian wrapped his fingers around her hip bones and lifted her ass. “Hands on the bench, baby. Legs wide. I’ve wanted to fuck you good since we got here. That quickie in the bathroom was hardly enough. All those men looking at you, wanting you, but I’m the only one who can have you. I’d love to have them watch. Their cocks hard and weeping because they know they’ll never feel the heaven of your pussy.”

Hot, velvet steel caressed her thighs. She’d been so absorbed in her orgasm...

A single thrust took her breath away.

“Yes, my beauty. Heaven,” he said in a whispered breath.

Lauren curled her fingers around the bench and ground her hips against him. Every twitch of his cock, each flex of his muscles vibrated through her. His fingers locked her in place while his thumbs drew lazy circles over her skin.

An eternity passed before he finally pulled out. Her cunt cried at the loss, and she swore it clutched at his penis, trying to entice it back. When the head was poised at her entrance, Sebastian started the slow glide back, filling her once more. His dick felt like a log of fire.

His grip tightened, a clear signal he fought coming too soon. She forced herself to be still. Sebastian sucked in a hard breath. She wished she could see him, watch the battle for control wash over his face and see the joy there when he knew he’d won.

He leaned forward, pushing himself deeper as his fingers wandered to her pussy. He parted her labia, then pinched them together, trapping her clitoris between the soft folds. He stroked it gently until it peeked from its nest.

“God...I wish I could lick you and fuck you at the same time.”

Another slow thrust and stroke had Lauren wishing...well, for whatever he wanted to do. “Please...just fuck me,” she begged.

He squeezed her clit hard and pivoted into her. His middle finger dove into the cleft and teased the hard jewel. When she cried out, his voice echoed. He slammed into her with the power of a jackhammer and just as fast. He grew hotter and harder with every plunge...so did her clit. She tried to rear up, to touch, to hold. His hand slid up her spine, keeping her in place while he fucked the breath out of them both.

He parted her labia once more, letting his hard balls beat her clit with every thrust of his cock. Lauren clenched her jaw against the urge to scream. Her pussy walls contracted, making him all the harder. They froze as one, orgasm pouring over them in a galaxy of pleasure. And as the moment left them, they eased back to earth on a simultaneous sigh.

Sebastian braced one hand on the bench and peeled the curtain of her hair away from her neck. Tender kisses branded this forever moment.

"Wow...her bracelet really did scratch you. I can see it even in this dim light." He traced over it, then kissed it.

"Hmmm...I can't feel a thing but you."

Sebastian chuckled and eased his body from hers. Before she could move, he used the pilfered napkin to clean away their lovemaking from her pussy. Then he kissed each butt cheek and helped her stand.

Lauren studied the night sky and finger-combed her hair into place while he set himself to rights. Any fool would be able to tell with a glance what they'd been doing, if they didn't already suspect.

"I miss being able to see the stars clearly," she said.

Sebastian glanced up. "Me, too."

Lights from urban sprawl made it impossible to enjoy the night sky. They'd talked about finding a place in the desert one day, so they wouldn't feel so lost without the stars when they were in the states. Or of possibly moving to Mexico to be closer to their physical work and away from the hubbub of civilization. Although civilization was rapidly encroaching there, too. Somehow it was one of those decisions they'd never gotten around to making.

"We'll be back where we belong soon, my beauty. You and I and the stars."

Lauren turned a puzzled look his way. That was the second time he'd called her that tonight. *My beauty*. An odd term, archaic. In fact, even his voice sounded different when he'd said it.

She shrugged it off. Probably something he thought was romantic.

"We need to get inside." Sebastian tossed the napkin in a nearby trash can. "It's almost time. Ready?"

"Yes." She stepped into the arm he offered.

He caught her chin on the crook of his finger and kissed her. The love on his face said more than all the words he could ever utter. The light caught his brown eyes just so, bringing out the gold in their depths. For an instant she imagined they glowed with inner fire, liquid...

He swatted at something over his head, and the illusion disappeared. "Damn bug. Something's been buzzing me since we stepped outside. Let's go, sweetheart." He patted her on the butt and led her back toward the party.

No drumbeats or chanting this time. But the fire in her blood remained, ready to be ignited at his command.

Lauren snickered. She'd definitely had too much to drink.

"Something funny?" he asked.

"No more champagne for me tonight."

"I think that makes two of us. After all, it might spoil my surprise."

Lauren grinned. "You really have a surprise for me?"

"Oh, yeah. A big one."

He patted her rear once more as they walked inside.

## Chapter Three

Sebastian wanted to beat on his chest and swing from vines. Sex with Lauren was always great, but tonight it felt over the top. He chalked it up to the adrenaline rush of the exhibit and the fact that neither of them could expend their energy digging. They'd felt like caged animals more times than not since they were dragged into this fund-raising effort. What else was there to do but to plan and execute fun sex? No one would be foolish enough to complain about that side benefit, especially with a hot, very accommodating spouse like Lauren.

He passed a sizzling gaze over her as they worked their way back to their table. Sebastian couldn't believe he was hard again so fast. It was the thought of the look on her face when she saw the duplicate idol sitting in the middle of their bed waiting for her. She'd laugh, then she'd get that fuck-me-good look in her eyes and suggest he show her how to use it.

*Let me count the ways.*

He frowned when he saw her rub at the scratch on her neck. It had made an angry welt at the back where it curved toward her shoulder. He could swear he'd tasted blood when he'd kissed it. Though her long hair covered it, the fact it existed at all bothered him. If he could see it in the dimly lit garden, it was enough of a wound to have something put on it.

Liam and Wyatt stood as they returned to the table. Lauren wouldn't want a big deal made out of this. Frankly, he didn't either. He had a feeling Viola would fall over herself with apologies. He gently steered Lauren toward Wyatt before she could slip into her seat. The other man's attention was caught between a smile and curiosity.

"Lauren and I want to go over a few points with you before we begin. We'd feel better if we could check the PowerPoint presentation one last time. We might have discovered some discrepancies."

It was a plausible excuse. Wyatt had been working with them nonstop the last six months to organize and assemble the catalog as well as audiovisual presentation for the exhibit. They'd also spent enough time with him -- Sebastian especially -- for Wyatt to know bullshit when he heard it.

"Sure." He tossed his napkin to the table as he stood, then led the way to the audiovisual booth camouflaged into the wall at the back of the room. What looked like a three-dimensional tree trunk on the mural was actually a small room.

"Something wrong?" Wyatt asked halfway there.

"I need a first aid kit. Viola's bracelet scratched the hell out of Lauren's neck."

Lauren tsked and stopped. "For crying out loud --"

Sebastian nudged her into motion. "Indulge me. I don't like the look of it. I'd feel better if we put something on it."

Wyatt frowned. "So would I. I've seen six year olds take better care of plastic jewelry than Viola does the real stuff. No telling where it's been, but I can guarantee it's probably not too clean. There's dirt on the planet younger than some of those antiques she wears."

He tapped on the door of the booth, then stepped inside. Claude Draper peered at them over his half-glasses. Stubby fingers were poised on the keyboard ready to execute the slide show. Hard to believe those fingers could fly over the keys at one hundred twenty words a minute.

"First aid kit?" Wyatt asked.

Claude pointed to the blue box on the wall behind the door. In no time, Wyatt had a packet of antibiotic cream in Sebastian's hands.

Lauren pulled her hair away and arched her neck to him for care. A barely opened cut crowned the top of the welt. Microscopic drops of blood dotted the line. At least it looked like it had dried quickly.

"Looks like it stings." Wyatt looked down his nose at the wound while Sebastian dabbed the ointment on.

"It does," she replied. "Took my breath away when it happened. For a second it felt like I'd been stabbed with a needle. It still burns a little, too. I really didn't want to make a big deal about it, especially since the Prentices invited us to spend the weekend with them."

Sebastian froze. Were they supposed to share that information? Liam hadn't said not to. He said the expedition was unique, not secret.

"Is this about the expedition he's putting together?" Wyatt asked.

"Yes," they answered together.

"Are you going?"

Sebastian tossed the empty foil packet into the trash can. "You mean for the weekend or on the expedition?"

“Either.” He shrugged. “Both.”

Another difficult question to answer. They’d been working nonstop for funding for *this* dig. Wyatt might not appreciate them being whisked off for something different.

“We’re going for the weekend. After all, they did pay for all this.” He looked around for something to wipe the ointment from his fingers and snagged a few tissues from a box next to Claude. They shredded with the first wipe. “As for this new expedition, we aren’t committing to anything until we have more details.”

“And we certainly don’t intend to do anything that will jeopardize our current project.” Lauren combed her hair into place, waving off Wyatt’s offer of a bandage to cover the scratch. She was going to regret that when her hair stuck to the ointment, but Sebastian wasn’t going to argue with her about it.

Cupping Sebastian’s hand, she dabbed the wads of tissue over his fingers, cleaning each one slowly...up and down. His cock pulsed for similar attention. He glanced at Wyatt and Claude from the corner of his eye to see if the other men noticed the shift to sensuality.

Claude watched his monitor, ignoring them all.

Wyatt stared at the wall behind them, in a daze of thought. “I understand it’s big, unique,” he said, more to himself than to them.

Sebastian knew he meant Liam’s expedition, but the comparison resonated elsewhere.

Wyatt’s gaze snapped to them. “See if you can get them to extend an invitation to me.”

It wasn’t a request. It was a demand. And it put Sebastian on high alert. His hard-on now wasn’t gearing for sex; it was in battle mode. He ordered it to calm and gave Wyatt a look that clearly said, *What the fuck?*

Wyatt lifted his palms. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean --”

“It’s okay.” Sebastian waved away anything more. He liked the man, respected his work. Wyatt was as much a scientist as the best of them. Who wouldn’t want a shot at a unique expedition? For all Wyatt had done for them, getting him an invite to the Prentices was the least they could do in return.

“We’ll see what we can do.”

A sigh eased the tension from Wyatt’s shoulders. “Just steer the conversation in that direction, and I’ll take it from there.”

“Five minutes,” Claude told them.

He and Wyatt glanced at their watches to confirm.

Lauren tossed the spent tissues into the trash as she swung the door open. “I’ve got just enough time to go to the bathroom.”

Sebastian was right behind her. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Wyatt curl his fingers over Claude’s ample shoulder.

“We were never here. You never heard a thing.”

“Got it,” the answer was by rout, absentminded, as Claude focused on his equipment and the task ahead. He could have been agreeing to anything.

Wyatt patted his shoulder. “Thanks.”

Sebastian took a step back when Wyatt started his way. His eyes looked like molten gold, charged by a fire in their depths. Sebastian blinked, and the image was gone. He would have laughed at himself if he hadn’t been so rattled about it.

Lauren was right. They’d had too much champagne. Neither one of them were drinkers, other than the occasional glass of wine on those rare occasions when they went to dinner. He hoped he didn’t make a fool of himself during the presentation. Maybe he’d already done so. The quickie in the bathroom, tryst in the garden...

Ah, but he couldn’t help smiling over that. It was daring, hot, but definitely not foolish.

“If you want him quiet, maybe you should have slipped him a twenty.” Sebastian kept his voice low as Wyatt joined him.

Wyatt shrugged. “Sometimes a word is enough if presented in the right manner. Nervous?”

Was it that apparent? God, no more alcohol for him. “I’ve given presentations before, but for some reason I am nervous about tonight.”

“You should be. There’s a lot at stake.” Wyatt cupped his shoulder, just as he had Claude. “More so than you realize.”

Warmth spread down his arm, over his chest, into his stomach. Sebastian shifted his gaze to the hand it emanated from.

Wyatt quickly dropped the hold. “Relax. You’ll do great.”

At that point Sebastian wasn’t sure whether to thank him for the vote of confidence, or to grab Lauren and get the hell away from all of these people as fast as they could.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lauren felt like a dewy-eyed teenager listening to the lecture Sebastian had practiced a hundred times over. She never tired of his voice, or of hearing him talk about something that meant so much to them. Good-looking men were a dime a dozen, but there was no bigger turn on than an intelligent man who knew his profession well. Lauren supposed that made her the biggest nerd in the world, but at least she had good company.

As always, he filtered humor in with the presentation. No one could accuse him of being a dry speaker. He’d make a wonderful professor one day. She glanced around the room. All eyes were on him. God, it made her proud!

Lauren felt someone’s breath against her hair and pulled away to find Viola hovering over her shoulder. Her gray eyes raked over Sebastian’s body...and not in a way Lauren



thought was flattering. The more time she spent in the Prentices' company, the less she liked them. And this was after a couple of hours? What would a weekend be like?

"I have to admit I was disappointed when the two of you went to the garden to clear his head," she whispered. "I was rather enjoying the view. But it hardly matters since that damned podium is blocking the good stuff."

A scowl pulled Lauren's eyebrows together, but it was Wyatt's tap to her knee that kept her from telling Viola Prentice what she really thought. If this was what associating with the Prentices was going to give them, they could keep their damn money.

Lauren sighed and focused on the cadence of Sebastian's words. They needed the funding, or the dig might not be continued in the fashion it deserved. It might not continue at all. If they cut costs, rethought their approach...

"I'm dying to know what Barry said that made you so furious." Viola's whisper drilled into her ear with the persistence of a whining mosquito.

"He wanted to know if I was pregnant," she pushed out through clenched teeth.

Viola craned her neck around until she could see Lauren's face. "Are you?"

From the expression on the woman's face, she might as well have asked if Lauren had bubonic plague.

"No."

Her abrupt answer didn't faze Viola in the least. In fact, she actually smiled. Lauren half expected her to say, "Good." If she had, Lauren was prepared to walk out and never look back.

*The dig, remember the people depending on you.* She pulled in a deep breath and shut out the annoyance.

"The wealth of data we've uncovered has been beyond amazing." Sebastian's lecture was coming to a close. "Who knows what other wonders exist beneath the soil. I've always believed that the key to our future lies in uncovering the clues to our past. It's more than rewarding to see that belief substantiated in the work Lauren, myself, and our colleagues have achieved. Thanks to the Braden Institute and the Prentice Museum for their generous support in seeing this exhibit come to life for you. I do hope you enjoy your walk into the past. Who knows what mysteries await discovery? Lauren and I look forward to searching for them for years to come."

Applause exploded through the room, lifting Lauren's spirits, swelling her heart with pride. He made his way back to the table amid back slaps and handshakes. Congratulations also came her way. In minutes they were swept into the vortex of popularity once more. She hoped it helped for funding, hoped they'd have enough to cut ties to the Prentices and go back to work. She wracked her brain for any excuse they could use to forego the offered ride home and the weekend visit, something, anything...

When Sebastian was pulled away to schmooze another knot of people, Lauren sank into her chair. Her head hurt, her stomach churned. She laughed to herself. At least her neck didn't sting anymore.

She glanced up when Wyatt placed a glass of water before her. "Thanks."

"No problem," he said as he slipped into his seat. "Long night."

It wasn't the first they'd had since this started, but it was the most intense. Up until this moment it had all been academic; this was face-to-face. "Do you think it will be enough?"

"Tired of the game?" He leaned on his forearms as he edged closer.

"Yes," she freely admitted.

"I don't blame you." He toyed with a crumb he'd found on the tablecloth, pushing it around with his index finger. "Some of these people can grate on your nerves after awhile, especially the Prentices."

"I don't know. You seem to get on very well with them, judging from that little peck on the lips you gave Viola."

He obliterated the crumb under the press of his finger, then eased back. "Just another form of sucking up. Viola expects it after she's known a man for awhile. I want their money so..." He shrugged a shoulder.

"I'll be damned if she'll get the same attention from Sebastian," she added.

"Hard to tell if she'll expect it. Can't say it's done me any good. Look at it this way. If I got along that well with them, I would have automatically been included in this little weekend get together."

"Ah..." She tucked her arms over her chest. "You're mad because you were excluded."

He grinned. "Damn straight. Wouldn't you be? After all I've...invested. Think of how you'd feel if you discovered no one contributed to this. Now times that by ten and it might equal my feelings."

Lauren saw his point. It was a little dirty of the Prentices, though she had little knowledge of what their association was with Wyatt. And yet...hadn't he balked when Barry announced they'd wanted to host the exhibit here? Not in so many words, but in the hesitant way he'd agreed.

"You weren't pleased when they offered the museum for us. Why?"

Again the shrug. "There were nonspecific rumors of ill health in some circles. I was concerned that might jeopardize our goal."

Lauren glanced at the couple, now sharing the spotlight with Sebastian. "Apparently unfounded rumors."

"So it seems. Look" -- he swiveled her way once more -- "I know the two of you aren't comfortable. I suspect the last thing you want is to spend the weekend with these people. But

you've come this far. Do you really want to let an opportunity pass? You might think it doesn't matter now, but when you're waist-deep in dirt, sloughing through the mud, fighting mosquitoes, and questioning which way to go because there's not enough in the budget, you'll regret you didn't take this chance." He jerked his head toward Sebastian. "Do you want to do that to him?"

Lauren pressed her fingers against the bridge of her nose. When did things get to be so fucking complicated? The answer was painfully obvious -- the minute they agreed to this. With each second that ticked by, the hole got deeper.

"Headache?" Sebastian's arms wrapped around her.

She leaned into the kiss he placed at her temple. "Something like that."

"Things are starting to break up. We should be clear to leave shortly." He draped his hands over her shoulders as he stood behind her. She caught the groan that threatened to escape when he kneaded his thumbs against the base of her neck and somehow made it come out a sigh instead. The man knew how to ease her tension, in more ways than one. With every flex into her stiff muscles, Lauren melted a little more.

"Liam, Lauren and I appreciate your offer to take us home, but it's really out of your way. Wyatt only lives a few miles from us. We'll ride with him. We'll see you tomorrow. What time? Are you certain you want us there for the entire weekend?"

Lauren hid her smile in a neck roll. He segued into that one very nicely and slipped them out of one awkward moment at the same time. Clever, intelligent, sexy, and oh-so good with those fingers of his.

"Weekend?" Wyatt latched onto the word.

Lauren looked at them all from under her eyebrows. "You mean you won't be there? But I thought... Never mind." She dutifully clamped her mouth shut and let the chips fall. It didn't take long.

"Liam..." Viola fanned her fingers at the base of her throat. "You forgot Wyatt?"

He gave her an indulgent smile and slipped her hand into his. "But, love, you said you were going to tell him."

Interesting choice of words -- tell, not ask.

"Oh, dear...I don't recall."

Lauren would swear she could hear the woman batting her eyelashes. Odd how a couple who'd impressed her so much at their initial meeting could have fallen from grace so quickly.

Liam huddled forward, his voice low. "We're assembling a team for a special expedition, Wyatt. Of course we want you included. How could we do something so groundbreaking without you? I can't believe we each thought the other had talked to you, and neither of us had."

Judging from the waves of alcohol pouring off the man, perhaps that wasn't such a mystery after all. It might also help explain Viola's diarrhea of the mouth. Drink had flowed freely tonight. Lauren was tired, stressed, and had probably misjudged them.

"It would be my pleasure." Wyatt consented with a tilted nod their way. "Time?"

"Excellent." Viola clapped her hands. "Eleven for brunch." She cupped Wyatt's cheek. "You do forgive us, don't you?"

He wrapped his hand around hers. "Of course." Then he kissed her palm.

Lauren craned her neck and glanced up at Sebastian. His smirk was nearly her undoing. She prayed they'd never reach a point where they stooped that low. It was bad enough having to kiss someone's ass; she didn't think she could stomach having to kiss any other part of them. But then, six months ago she never imagined being anywhere except happily absorbed in her marriage and her work.

## Chapter Four

A light breeze curled around Lauren as she stepped outside with Sebastian and Wyatt. Cool air drifted under her dress and right to her crotch. She sorely missed those pantyhose now.

She tried in vain to brush the night chill from her arms, and squeezed her thighs tight to protect her assets. Standing outside the museum while they waited for Wyatt's car, she and Sebastian were more exposed to the elements than they'd been in the garden. Of course, then she'd been so hot for him an arctic storm couldn't have cooled her down.

She wasn't the only one shivering. As people left the building to queue up for their cars, gasps from the ladies quickly followed. The dropping temperature wasn't out of the norm for a San Diego night, but the hot day had left everyone anticipating warmth, not chill.

"Here, honey." Sebastian slipped off his jacket and wrapped it and then his arms around her. His scent surrounded her with the warmth. She cuddled into the cove of his arms, contentment echoed in a sigh that turned Wyatt's head.

"Sorry." He shifted his position to try to block the breeze. It didn't help, but Lauren appreciated the consideration. "Our chauffeur shouldn't be much longer. I'm guessing he got caught in the rush of everyone wanting to leave."

Once the Prentices had departed, it didn't take long for others to do so, too. Vehicles in all shapes and sizes -- none with peeling paint -- crawled forward to pick up passengers. No one wasted time leaving the second they could. Now that the event was over and the hosts gone, polite walls put those who remained at a distance. Everyone either wanted to get home or were afraid private conversation with the Garners might end up being a push for money -- perhaps a little of both. Lauren couldn't blame them for either. She'd had enough fundraising for one night, too. Hell, she'd had enough for a lifetime.

"There's the car." Wyatt jerked his head toward the line. "The pearl-colored Lexus ten down."

It felt like ten miles. Protocol decreed they wait their turn. Lauren was sorely tempted to jump the line. Then she noticed the scowls directed at those who did and decided being cold was preferable to having a black mark next to her name.

"Where's your car?" Sebastian asked.

Lauren frowned. *That's right... Wyatt drove an Escape Hybrid.*

He gave them an indulgent smile at the question. "This belongs to the institute. When I knew Barry's departure was imminent, I requested it be brought. The driver will see you get home. He'll drop me by my car."

"If the institute had a car, why didn't Barry use it for tonight?" It was getting harder to keep her teeth from chattering.

He gave a humorless snort. "He calls it an ostentatious display whose money would be best used elsewhere."

Finally, something she and Barry agreed upon. That had been her opinion about all of this from the start.

"So the whole deal with letting the Prentices offer us a ride home was a power play." Another one intricately woven into the grand scheme of things.

Wyatt considered it for a moment, then nodded. "I suppose it was." He smiled at Sebastian over her head. "Aren't you glad you won the move?"

"Winning a move isn't winning the game," her husband replied.

Lauren hugged his arms around her tighter. "Maybe not, but it's a nice start to the finish."

Wyatt conceded the point with a nod her way. "And even nicer to show you can't and won't be controlled."

She supposed it was. They'd been jerked this way and that the last six months. At some point a person had to take a stand. Business associates was one thing, but the Prentices had tried to insinuate themselves into their personal lives tonight.

Lauren bit back a sad laugh. They still had this weekend to deal with. Forewarned was forearmed. She and Sebastian would simply have to set boundaries and see they remained in place.

Wyatt swung open the back door as the car rolled to a stop before them. Lauren wasted no time sliding onto the seat and felt the tiniest rush of bliss as her body touched the chamois-soft leather. Sebastian waved Wyatt off and slid in beside her. She nearly laughed out loud as his eyes widened at the feel. He shut the door and caressed the seat between them.

Thankfully, neither Wyatt nor the driver noticed their awe. Or if they did, they didn't act like it. Their chauffeur was an average guy: dark suit, dark brown hair cut short, medium build. The kind of guy who wouldn't have stuck out in a crowd if it weren't for the fact he was wearing sunglasses. That couldn't be a safe thing to do at night...while driving. Wyatt didn't seem concerned, neither did Sebastian, who still fondled the seat.

Wyatt slipped into the front seat and twisted around to talk to them as the driver pulled away. "I know it was a ballsy thing to ask, but I want you to know I really appreciate what you did tonight. I've been after the Prentices for a long time. Getting me an invite to this weekend gathering is the chance I've been hoping for."

Sebastian cupped her knee as he appraised the other man. "Then I hope it works out for you."

Wyatt gave the semblance of a smile. "I hope it works for all of us."

"That would be nice," he replied.

"More so than you realize." He faced front and pointed. "There's my car. Thanks." He had the door open before the vehicle came to a full stop. "All that stuff about 'it's not if you win or lose, it's how you play the game' is crap. It's all about winning, and you play until you do."

"Or die trying?" Sebastian shot back.

Wyatt smiled. "Exactly. See you tomorrow for the next round." His foot hit the pavement, and he was off. Their driver waited until the rear lights flashed on the back of Wyatt's Escape, indicating he'd remotely unlocked the door, before he eased into the line of cars heading downhill.

"So much greed," Lauren said, more to herself than to Sebastian. But the soft leather under her fingers was wonderful, and she couldn't help imagining what it would feel like against her naked body. She could buy a chamois and find out just as well, but where was the sensuality in that? This she could stretch against, roll on, let the leather make love to her skin.

She glanced up to see if Sebastian had noticed her new fascination. Elbow on armrest, he stared ahead, fingers drawing invisible lines on his chin as he puzzled through a thought. He called it his scientist geek face. She'd never known any other man who could get so locked into thought. Some excellent ideas always came out of the process, but getting anything that remotely resembled conversation out of him during this phase was impossible.

Using Sebastian's tux jacket as a blanket, Lauren wiggled deeper into the seat. She could fall asleep cradled here. The bench could have fit three people, but the hump between the two main bucket-type seats would have made that uncomfortable. The lack of a seat belt there also made it a no-no.

She appreciated not being crowded, after a night of nothing but people everywhere she turned. Her jaw actually hurt from smiling and talking so much. Lauren knew she'd been

tense, too. The headache at the base of her skull was proof of that. But she hadn't realized how tense until she sank into this blissful comfort.

"Are you cold, Mrs. Garner?" The driver's voice held a light accent that hinted of Hispanic roots. "I'll be glad to crank up the heat."

She looked at him in the rearview mirror, but those sunglasses made it impossible to know if he looked back. "I'm fine. Just getting comfortable. You have our address?"

"Mr. Caldwell gave me everything. And to ease any concerns either of you might have... I wear the sunglasses because the glare from the headlights gives me migraines. Having them won't impair my driving." His attention shifted back to the road, effectively discouraging further conversation.

Lauren glanced at Sebastian. He'd listened to the brief exchange, but said nothing. In nanoseconds he was back to whatever puzzle absorbed his mind. Streetlamps and headlights from passing cars cast shadows in the frown tugging his eyebrows together. Damn, the man was sexy as sin. She longed to sit astride his lap, breasts bare and rubbing against his shirt while she licked that furrow off his face, tamed it into submission.

His lips would part on a sharp gasp, inviting her tongue inside. She'd let him have it...eventually...after she toyed a groan out of him that would shatter any doubts their driver might have about what they were doing. She'd slowly unbutton Sebastian's shirt, flick her fingers over his nipples, and when they came to life, she'd catch one between her teeth, rolling it just so.

Lauren crossed her legs and squeezed the ache her fantasy birthed. Her pussy was damp and demanding immediate attention. With Sebastian locked in thought and their driver presumably focused on traffic...

Hmmm...the jacket hid her from view, but she'd have to be oh-so quiet, oh-so cautious to keep her secret. It was such a bad-girl thing to do; knowing that made her want to do it all the more.

She uncrossed her legs and parted them as she inched her dress to her hips. At the slightest hint either man noticed, she'd freeze, perhaps feign sleep -- though that wouldn't fool Sebastian.

Her fingers touched skin and wasted no time wandering to the hair standing guard above her clit. She combed through the short strands slowly, petting herself and giving a silent promise of pleasure. Her middle finger parted her slick labia and curled around her erect clitoris. She locked her jaw against a moan, eyes wide and alert for detection.

She dared the barest of movement -- a small circle around her clit. Anything more, like the plunge of her fingers deep into her cunt or a rapid flash over her pussy for quick release, and... She flicked her finger back and forth. It felt good, dangerous, heady. Her orgasm rose quickly to the surface, then hovered there just out of reach.



She imagined Sebastian kneeling between her thighs, her legs tossed over his strong shoulders while his tongue teased her to climax. His fingers, thick and long, would probe her cunt and ass, pumping slow while he dragged the sensations up, up, up. When she'd be close to coming, he'd dart away, then suck her labia and trace their valleys.

Lauren swallowed past a throat gone dry. God, she was close. How was she going to hide the shudder threatening to overtake her? How could she possibly stop now?

If Sebastian caught her, would he tease her, or shove her to the seat and ram his cock into her? Would he make her bare her breasts and do it again so he could watch? And what of the mysterious driver, whose sunglasses hid the slightest glance? Was he watching her now? Did he long to see her nipples hard between Sebastian's fingers? Did he sport a massive erection that demanded he drive one-handed? Maybe he'd pull over and ask to join them.

Her body clenched in preorgasmic wonder at the thought. It was one of those fantasies they'd talk about in the heat of the moment to stoke the fires. Something to whisper to each other when others were near. And they were very good with their fantasies.

The garden sex sent another rush through her. The memory of being bent over the bench, her ass warmed by his spanking, his cock pounding away...

Lauren held her breath as a climax rolled through her. *Sweet*. With a contented sigh, she wiped her sticky fingers on her thigh, then eased her dress down.

Sebastian's hot hand swooped under the jacket. He captured her wrist, slowly pulled her hand up to his face, and inhaled. Obviously she wasn't as discreet as she thought. Fresh desire wiggled through her.

He traced his tongue around each finger, then focused on the middle one and sucked it between his lips. He twirled his tongue around and around the digit. Her clit cried out in protest, wanting the attention for its greedy little self.

When he licked all remnants of pussy juice from her, he let her hand go. She skidded her palm down his neck, over his shoulder and hard chest, down to what she knew was waiting for her. Sebastian caught her hand before she reached her goal. Lacing his fingers through hers, he mimed a *tsk* and winked.

Lauren shot a glance to the driver as they settled back for the rest of the ride. Not so much as a hint he'd noticed anything going on behind him. She hoped that was the case. Lauren didn't know what the hell was wrong with her tonight -- taking a risk like that. It felt like she'd been dosed with a double-shot of horny along with the alcohol.

She edged toward Sebastian until she was close to his ear. "Do you think he noticed?" she whispered.

He nuzzled her neck until her earlobe was next to his lips. "I have a feeling a man like that is paid to notice everything," he whispered back, then captured the tag of flesh between his teeth in a nip that zeroed out all other concerns.

Lauren closed her eyes and arched her neck. His hand was under the jacket again, peeling down her neckline and bra. A pinch to her nipple curled her toes. She sucked in a sharp breath and eased back. The want in his eyes nearly made her cry out.

"I think we're almost home," he said.

She forced the fog away and looked out the window. Traffic zipped by on the four-lane street. Lights from one shopping complex after another glared without end, boasting of twenty-four-hour shopping, drive-thrus, and all-you-can-eat whatever. One more stoplight and they'd be at the turn for their apartment.

Lauren tucked her boobs away and smoothed her dress to her knees, but kept Sebastian's jacket tucked over her hard nipples. A new fantasy flushed over her -- Sebastian ordering her to bare her breasts to their driver, to keep her hands behind her back while he sucked her tits, and Sebastian watched.

She clutched the jacket under her chin. What the hell was wrong with her? She hadn't been this horny in ages. Probably caused by a mix of nerves, excitement, and champagne, she decided, and smiled when she saw their little apartment complex ahead.

A wrought iron fence with arched gate led to the gardenlike courtyard. The elderly couple who owned the place were warm-hearted gems and watched their apartment whenever Lauren and Sebastian were gone.

Lauren had no complaints. Affordable housing in San Diego was hard to find. They might have barely eight hundred square feet of living space, but it was still larger than their field tent. The walls were thick, with no worries about conversations or extraneous activity being overheard. The tenant on the second floor could march elephants, and the first floor tenant would never hear a peep. And for San Diego, the price was a definite bargain.

Their driver started to swing the car toward the back entrance.

"Here's fine," Sebastian said, and unclicked his seat belt when the man stopped.

Lauren had the door open a second later. They thanked the man for his time, waved him off, and hurried to their apartment. A motion detection light turned on over the door when they neared. A package sat in front of it.

Lauren picked it up as Sebastian started to unlock the door. "It's from our moms."

Using his key, Sebastian sliced open the tape and pulled up the flap. The porch light glistened off two Leatherman multitools nestled inside a bed of cotton. A small jaguar was engraved on each one along with their names.

"Wow...now that's a thoughtful gift." Sebastian rubbed his thumb over the image. "We can really use these."

"There's a note inside." She lifted the card to the light and read:

*A little something special to commemorate the day.*

*Love,*

*Moms*

*P.S. -- We hope we haven't pissed off any Maya gods by using the jaguar royalty symbol.*

Sebastian chuckled and started to pull out every tool it contained.

"Could we at least go inside with your new toy?"

That jerked his head up. A smirk quickly followed. "Absolutely."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sebastian swung open the front door and flicked on the wall switch to light the lamps. Chaos welcomed them inside. At least it was organized chaos. Lauren and he had stacks of reading material everywhere. It was a sad filing system, but they knew where everything was and had no one to please but themselves.

All flat surfaces were covered. He and Lauren ate off TV trays. Two laptops, a printer, scanner, and fax machine took up their yellow kitchen table. Their mothers had given up on them long ago and quit rolling their eyes wherever they walked in. It might not be orderly by most people's standards, but at least it was clean. The pristine bathroom always got them gold stars from both moms.

Lauren let out a small moan as she kicked off her shoes by the front door. "Now *that's* what I needed." She curled her toes into the thick carpet.

Sebastian sympathized. His shoes had been pinching him all night. He wasted no time following her lead. The carpet cushioned his aching feet like jungle moss.

"Really?" He yanked the bow tie loose and started on the shirt studs. "That's not the impression I got on the drive home."

A pink flush covered her cheeks. "Oh? Was I a bad girl again?" She draped his tux jacket over the back of the couch and placed the box from their moms on top.

His heartbeat skipped into double-time. Sebastian had been thinking of this moment from the second he'd placed the fake idol in the middle of their bed. His cock was granite hard. He wanted to press her to her knees, weave his fingers through her silky hair, and sink his dick into her mouth.

"You were very bad." He kept his voice low, at that special tone she loved to hear when he was intent on seducing her. The glimmer in her eyes announced his success. She took a step his way, halting when he lifted his palm. "But not so bad that I would take back the present I got you tonight."

She tilted her head to one side. "You got me a present?"

"I did." He removed the cummerbund and shrugged free of the shirt.

Her light brown gaze dusted over his chest. A smile lifted one corner of her lips. "Is it you?"

He matched her smile with one of his own. "I can only hope you'll find some use for me after you see it."

Lauren's bright laughter filled the room and doubled the agony pounding in his trousers. "I'm intrigued. Where is it?"

"In the middle of our bed." He stepped on the toe of one sock, pulled his foot free, then did the same with the other.

"So that's what you *forgot* when you had to dash back inside."

He hitched his shoulder. "I'll never tell."

Lauren raked her gaze from his eyes to his crotch and up again. "I think something else is telling for you." She turned toward the bedroom, then glanced over her shoulder at him. "Coming?"

"I plan to be. With or without you. Your call." He couldn't stop his smirk. "If you decide I must do it on my own, maybe you'll at least let me watch you...enjoy."

Lauren's laughter wrapped around him once more. "What the hell did you get me?"

Sebastian shoved trousers and boxers down and off his legs as long strides carried her the short distance to their bedroom. He hurried after her, erection bobbing before him all the way. Her dress hit him in the face as he neared the threshold. Sebastian let it slither to the floor, licking his skin as it did so.

Lauren lay curled around the idol, slowly petting its erection. "You really do know how to pick out the perfect gift. How did you manage? It looks like an exact copy."

"It is. I could go into all the details, but I don't want to spoil the moment."

"Oh? Are we going to have a moment?"

Sebastian rubbed his hand down the flat of his stomach, then fisted his cock. "I hope we're going to have more than one tonight."

"Hmm..." She rolled to her back and flicked her fingers over her puckered nipples. "The idol isn't nearly as impressive as you are."

"Flattery will get you anywhere, sweetheart. I couldn't help but notice you seem somewhat insatiable tonight."

She pinched her nipples and twirled the tips for him. "I know. I should be punished."

His balls tightened. Sebastian squeezed his dick to keep from coming. A drop of precum glistened at the head. "Look what you've done. I should make you lick it off."

"See...no discipline. It's all those months we spend within breathing distance of others. No reinforcement makes me...lax."

He gave his cock a loose stroke. "Seems to me you're a little anxious to have your ass warmed."

“Do you really blame me? You know how much it turns us both on. Everything swells to bursting. One flick, and I’m coming...again and again...”

Lauren pressed her hands down to her pussy, hairless except for a small thatch at the top. Moisture clung to her labia as she spread them. He loved how she kept herself free of hair right there, always ready to be eaten.

“I’m thinking it just might take the two of us to please you tonight.” He rubbed the precum over his glans.

She pressed her lips together and then licked them. “Oh, I’m thinking the same thing.”

Damn, after all these years, how in the world could she still manage to make him want to come with just the sound of her voice? “If you keep talking to me in that warm-brandy tone, my friend here will be taking up all the slack.”

“I love you,” she whispered, and circled her finger around her clit. It was raspberry ripe, red and swollen, begging to be tasted.

“I love you, too, baby.” Sebastian crawled up to her from the foot of the bed. The brush of his cock against the mattress tore a groan from his throat, or was it the scent of her pussy that devastated him?

She opened for him, one leg curling over his shoulder. He kissed her thigh, then eased it back to the mattress and grasped the idol. The body of it fit his hand to perfection, confirming in his mind it might have been used for similar purposes centuries ago. He turned it so it faced backward and slid the phallus into her cunt. The body cradled her buttocks perfectly. Its hands nudged her anus; just the right pressure would slip them beyond the puckered muscle.

Lauren sighed with pleasure. “Nice, but still not as nice as you.”

Sebastian grunted a response and thrust it slowly in and out. Her hips rotated more with every stroke. Eyes closed, she clutched her arms up and around her pillow. If he moved just right, the idol’s feet nudged her clit. He pushed deeper, and the hands slipped past the tight anal ring.

Lauren’s hips bolted from the bed with her moan. He captured her clit between his lips, nibbling it until she thrashed her head from side to side. He could feel her heat build, smell the juices that poured from her. Her body tensed, ready to orgasm. Sebastian flashed his tongue over the rigid piece of flesh, reveling in her gasp, then raked down into her valleys before she could come.

She beat her fists against the mattress in frustration. He smiled as he lapped up one side and down the other. She shoved her fingers into his hair, trying to force his mouth where she wanted.

“Someone’s asking to be tied up, aren’t they?” A sharp smack to her butt cheek loosened her grip.

She groaned as her pussy clenched. "Begging! I'm begging for it. Please. You don't know how it feels to be so close."

"Yes, I do, sweetheart," he said softly. "Every time those hot lips of yours wrap around my dick." He nailed her clit in place with his teeth and whipped his tongue over it.

Lauren rolled her hips into the caress, writhed onto the idol he pushed deep while Sebastian mindlessly fucked the bed. He felt the tremors in her muscles and shoved to his knees to keep from coming with her. He envied the idol she clenched, knowing how sweet that vise-like grip was.

Her body locked, frozen at the peak. Then she came on a cry that threatened to yank the cum right out of him. He'd wanted to take his time, build her up over and over. But if he didn't fuck her right now he'd die.

Sebastian yanked the idol free and scrambled to replace it. Its *thunk* against the floor punctuated his plunge into her fire. He bowed into the feeling, letting the ripples overtake him as he fought to hang on for just a little longer.

Lauren wrapped her legs high around his torso, locking them in place at the ankle. Short fingernails gouged into his shoulders. Diamond-hard nipples pierced his chest. His body tensed, ready to shoot his wad that very second. Sebastian forced himself to relax, to gain control over the ejaculation. He wanted to stay hard, to spend another hour fucking her, making her come.

He pulled in a deep breath through his nose. His shoulders relaxed slowly, then his back, legs, and arms followed. Another deep breath centered him. He dared a stroke out until his cock head was all that connected them. Lauren gasped. He seized her bottom lip in his and sank into bliss once more.

Shudders rippled over him. He forced them to subside, smiling to himself when he felt his control lock in. He screwed his dick around, rubbing his pubic mound over her clit until she squirmed beneath him.

Snagging her wrists, he pinned them to the bed on either side of her head as he hoisted himself higher. Her pussy contracted with every pivot he beat into it.

"Oh...God..."

"That's right, sweetheart," he said through pants of breath. "Come for me again. Squeeze that cock tight." Harder and faster he plowed into her. He loved the feel of her, those wicked little moans, the way she lay sprawled beneath him taking all he gave.

She started to come. Ripples rolled over his dick. Sebastian turned inside himself, fighting for the will to come without ejaculating. Lauren's long moan called to him on a level he'd never been able to describe. His balls tightened, electric shocks of pleasure zinged out, sweeping him into a full-bodied orgasm.

Eyes closed, he gasped with the sensations rolling through him. And best of all -- he was still hard as a rock and ready for more.

With Lauren's contented sigh, he released her wrists. She wrapped arms and legs around him in a loose hug. Sebastian kissed his way down her body, dragging the bed pillows with him. When he reached her hips, he rolled her over, tucking the pillows under her stomach.

She stretched into it, lifting her ass high. God, how could a man not love a woman who let you do anything to her?

Sebastian nipped her buttock. "Hold that position while I get our little friend."

He rolled from the bed and grabbed the idol. Starting at her ankle, he rubbed the phallus up one leg and down the other. Then he slipped it into the correct position. Lauren sighed with pleasure, grinding her pussy over it until the statue was neatly tucked between her labia. Sebastian pressed her into the pillows.

"Now keep that bottom up."

"Mmm...I think I might have been extra bad tonight."

"My thoughts exactly."

\* \* \* \* \*

Lauren lay there quivering with anticipation. She loved when they played like this. Every nerve ending she possessed tingled. She clenched the dildo inside her. It felt better than she'd imagined -- big, thick, filling her like Sebastian did. And soon she'd have him inside as well.

Cheek pressed against the bed, she listened as he walked to their dresser and slid the drawer open. The lint brush that doubled as a leather paddle would be nestled among his shorts, waiting innocuously to warm her backside. Her clit already throbbed, still greedy for more orgasms.

He'd spank her good tonight. She'd writhe on the idol with every smack, maybe even making herself come. He'd fuck her slow and hard, bringing her up again, maybe warming her bottom some more. Lauren's pussy muscles contracted at the thought.

Sebastian moved to the bedside table. She watched him retrieve a tube of KY and a condom. More evidence of the anal sex to come had her panting. Her eyes glazed when he rolled it over his erection. He tossed the lube next to her, then wrapped his fingers around the brush's handle and straddled her back, facing his target.

Lauren twitched as the soft bristles caressed her ass. He parted her cheeks and ran the brush between them. The idol wedged into her pussy kept him from petting her there. She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth as the memory of how the bristles felt there coursed through her.

Slow circles swept down her inner thighs and tickled the backs of her knees before continuing to her calves. Breath held, she waited for the tickle over the soles of her feet and then gasped when it happened. Arrows of fire licked up to her clit.

“Roll over,” he commanded, moving to her side.

Lauren didn't hesitate and quickly rolled to her back. He danced the bristles up her body, over her belly, then around and around her nipples until Lauren had lost all ability to think.

“Please, suck my tits. I need you to suck my tits.”

“No, sweetheart, I know what you need.” He grasped the idol and rubbed it into her clit.

“Offer it to me,” he said.

Heart thudding, she rolled into his thigh, presenting her ass once more. He wedged the idol against his knee and pulled her closer. Two quick smacks to her ass tore a groan from her. More followed, slow, succinct. She rocked into him and the idol with each one.

A harder whack brought her clit to high alert. She whimpered from the need to come, wiggling her ass for more...more. Faster the spanks came, raining over her hot bottom. She crawled higher into his lap, grinding and grinding toward orgasm. Lauren growled when it exploded through her, and she grappled for his cock.

Sebastian dodged her and tucked her hands behind the small of her back, spanking her thoroughly for breaking the rules. Her clit was back at attention, her pussy dripping from the excitement. Another orgasm was her reward. She came hard again, then collapsed limp and exhausted over him.

“Good girl.”

He rubbed his hand over her bottom, soothing what he'd punished. She felt him shift and seconds later cool lubricant touched her anus. He probed gently with one finger and then two, stretching her for his erection.

“Are you ready?” he whispered. “Ready for a good fucking?”

She felt like a noodle, but, hell yeah!

Lauren eased onto the pile of pillows, lifting herself for him. Sebastian settled between her legs. She heard the *slurp* as he lubed up. Long fingers curled around her hip. The tip of his cock pressed into her anus. Already she felt her body rise to the occasion. She loved being filled completely.

He glided in slowly. She sighed at the sensation.

“I can't hold back this time, baby.” His shaking voice backed up the words.

“Give it to me,” she managed to say, and pushed against him.

Sebastian let loose with a groan, pumping into her like his life depended on it. And Lauren was right there with him, riding him as hard as he rode her. Every flex of his dick spurred her on, that and the nudge of the idol over her clit.



He clutched her hips in place for his fucking. She wadded the sheets in her fists, fighting the orgasm that threatened to prematurely erupt. It built like a pressure cooker deep in her core, swelling and swelling until...

Sebastian plunged forward as he came. Lauren's climax exploded. Groans of pleasure merged. He pulled back and in again, releasing more jism. She thought she'd never stop coming. Finally, spent, they collapsed into each other's arms.

He relieved her of his weight and unseated their toy.

Lauren snuggled closer, tucking her head under his chin. "Wow," she murmured.

"I'll say."

"How did you get that made?"

"Actually, Wyatt helped me. Your interest was...apparent."

"And so was every other woman's who saw it. I think I'm officially embarrassed."

"Somehow I doubt that."

He knew her so well.

"If it matters, I trust his discretion," he said.

"It does." Lauren frowned as she thought about their interlude in the garden. She hoisted herself to her elbow and stared down at him. "The weirdest thing happened tonight when we were having sex in the garden. I looked at you and saw Wyatt."

Sebastian tucked her hair behind her ears. "You mean fantasized about him?"

She shook her head. "No, *saw* him. Not peeping either. It was like he was...superimposed over you. You called me 'my beauty.'"

A furrow tugged at his eyebrows. "I vaguely remember, but me saying that feels more like a dream, not real."

"You called me that twice. Then I saw..." She settled into the cove of his arm. "Never mind. Champagne, empty stomach."

But from the frown he continued to flash at the ceiling, Lauren had a feeling he didn't believe that.

"Do we have our heads screwed on straight, Sebastian?" she asked.

"I hope so," he muttered.

"Are we making a mistake?"

A sigh initially replied for him. "I don't know," he finally replied.

"What do we do?"

He kissed her forehead. "We play the game, sweetheart. We play the game."

\* \* \* \* \*

Wyatt clutched the porch rail of his second floor condo and watched the lightning zing across the clouds over the ocean. Every so often the rumble of thunder reached his sensitive ears. It was the perfect complement to the storm raging inside him.

He never expected what should have been his most triumphant act to be this difficult to carry out. After all these years, his goal clear and steady, he was being tested more than ever, and wasn't sure he could win this time.

The sliding glass door behind him opened. Joaquin's scent had reached him the instant he'd arrived in the parking lot. It hadn't taken him long to come inside.

"What's with the sunglasses?" Wyatt asked without turning.

Joaquin stepped up beside him. "You caught me at a bad moment. With the moon gone dark and the distraction of the storm on the horizon, Carmen and I had planned a night at Balboa Park. We were in the process of shifting when you called. I'm having a hard time keeping human form when I crave that of the jaguar. My eyes kept glowing."

Wyatt knew that problem all too well tonight -- the instant he'd stepped into the museum and sensed Ka-ra's return. An ache he hadn't felt since the night he'd lost her welled up inside him, making him do things he knew he shouldn't have.

"The Garners are safe at home now." Joaquin rested his forearms on the rail and stared out. The sunglasses were gone; his eyes the normal brown.

"Anyone follow you?"

"Not that I could tell. I doubled back to make sure, and all looked well. Are you sure they're the targets?"

If he had any doubts before, he didn't now. "Positive. Barry was right when he suggested using the Garners as bait. You saw how quickly the Prentices took advantage of the lure. Viola had ceiba darts in her bracelet. She shot one into Sebastian Garner and another into Lauren."

Joaquin looked his way. "Did it take?"

"Sebastian's, no. Lauren's, yes. The effects were instantaneous. The wood is already starting to rot."

"Then you need to get the salve on the wound right away to pull it and its poison out before it goes too far."

Wyatt closed his eyes against the pain of new loss. "She...she now carries Ka-ra within her."

Joaquin grabbed his arm and gave it a good shake. "She isn't Ka-ra. She belongs to Sebastian, and they are very much bonded."

He flashed open, angry eyes on a sharp intake of breath. "So are you and Carmen, but you share her with me."

"You know that's the way of our kind, or what's left of us," he snapped, and shoved Wyatt's arm away.

Wyatt refused to meet his gaze. It was a mistake. The lack of eye contact screamed of his guilt.

"By the gods! You didn't!" He jerked closer to look at his face. "You *did!*"

"I couldn't help it," he shot back defensively. "Ka-ra called to me. I *needed* her. Do you know how long it's been since --"

"I was there when she was taken. Don't preach to me about time. What exactly did you do?"

Wyatt rubbed at the ache in his chest. "I melded with Sebastian while he made love to Lauren...twice."

"Twice?" His voice was nearly a shout. Any louder and the neighbors on all sides would wake.

"Once when they were in the museum garden. Another when they reached home. I know Sebastian had something special for her and --"

"You can still tap into them at this distance?"

He made it sound like the worst of all sins. In his head Wyatt knew it was, but his heart...his aching heart...

"I couldn't at first. I think they have a protective totem of some kind. It blocked them for a short time, then the way cleared and I..."

"By all the gods in all the heavens..." Joaquin shoved away from the rail and started to pace. "If you don't give Lauren Garner the antidote, I will."

"I'll take care of it...tomorrow. I'll be spending the weekend with them at the Prentice estate. I managed to get invited, and I'm going to make damn sure I go on this expedition of theirs."

Joaquin snorted. "You'd be doing the world a favor by killing them in their sleep."

"Now who's being foolhardy?"

"Just be sure you keep us apprised in a more timely fashion. Tonight's last minute call could have been avoided. You and Barry had this worked out well in advance. I don't appreciate being kept out of the loop, nor does Carmen."

"My sincere apologies." Wyatt let his sarcasm underline the words. His hackles lifted. *He* was the alpha male, not Joaquin. Had this been the old days, the challenge would have been dealt with swiftly. But in the twenty-first century, allies were few.

A heavy sigh drew Joaquin to his side. He pressed his hand against Wyatt's back, stroking him. "Come run and prowl with us tonight. Mate with us. It's been too long since you did. Perhaps it will rain. You know how much we love feeling the rain on our bodies."

Wyatt accepted the caress as his right. Joaquin's deep purr soothed him, edging one of his own to his throat. The offer was tempting. However... "Not tonight, old friend. I want my own mate, not someone else's."

Joaquin dropped his hand and took a giant step back. "Remember that the next time you think of intruding on Sebastian and Lauren Garner, or, gods forbid, taking her from him."

The front door slammed with his exit. Nostrils lifted to the moist air, Wyatt followed his departure, not daring to move until the last of his scent left the parking lot below. Then he closed his eyes and shoved his hand into his trousers to stroke the erection that throbbed there. He let his mind travel, seeking her out.

*Just one last time*, he promised himself. *One last time.*

## Chapter Five

Sebastian eased from bed to keep from waking Lauren. She'd been asleep for hours. He'd been staring at the ceiling, haunted by the memory she'd stirred.

He walked to the bathroom to pee and then popped a couple of Tylenol to quell the headache pounding at his temples. Yellow light from the courtyard security system filtered through the bathroom window and cast his reflection in an eerie glow. Hands braced on the sink, he stared into the medicine cabinet mirror. Only he stared back, yet he heard Wyatt's voice in his head as if he were standing beside him.

*Yes, my beauty.*

Somehow, some way, Wyatt had inserted himself into their garden liaison. It took Lauren's comment to jolt the memory of how he'd felt at the time. There'd been a persistent tugging in the deepest recesses of his mind before those words had come out of their own volition. The tugging changed into the nagging whine of an insect, and he'd batted it away. Then there was the incident in the audiovisual booth, the look in Wyatt's eyes as he left.

Sebastian shifted his gaze to the white porcelain sink and then shoved away. It had to be some kind of hypnosis. No other explanation seemed responsible. But he couldn't for the life of him figure out why.

He wandered into the living room and retrieved his boxers from the pile of clothes he'd haphazardly discarded earlier. The sight of the package from their moms reminded him to remove the Leatherman from his tux pants. Sebastian tucked it in the waistband of his shorts and draped the tux over the back of the couch. They'd need to return it tomorrow before they went to the Prentices.

The politics of fund-raising churned his stomach. He'd love to take Lauren and leave for the dig. The reality of doing so wouldn't be pretty -- they'd never work again. If you wanted a long career, you didn't screw with the people who could make that happen.

He walked into the kitchen and flicked on the fluorescent light over the sink. Soft light filled the room. He helped himself to a glass of ice-cold chocolate milk and leaned against the counter while he sucked it down. His comfort food. Chocolate milk couldn't fix everything, but it sure made it easier to deal with...most of the time.

Sebastian rinsed out the glass and stuck it in the drainer. Returning to his previous stance, he pulled the Leatherman from his waistband and smoothed his finger over the jaguar engraving. Sebastian felt the metal warm beneath his thumb, deep in thought.

What *did* they really know about the Prentices, or Wyatt Caldwell, for that matter? He and Lauren had taken everything presented to them at face value. If this had been an archaeological site, they never would have settled for someone's word. They would have researched facts, dissected the evidence. Why did they blindly agree to all of this without doing the same thing? Because the request had come from their employer, the Braden Institute?

He set the multitool on the kitchen table as he sat down behind his laptop. One press of his finger and the computer came alive. The Braden Institute had been around for over a hundred years, dedicated to the discovery of ancient civilizations. He and Lauren were offered employment with them a couple months before they got their master's degrees. It was standard procedure for the institute to grab those they thought were the best and brightest. Until recently, it'd been a great association. It still was, he supposed. But this push to acquire funding was out of the norm for an organization that supposedly had a wealth of assets. Rather than question the stability of their long-time employer, he and Lauren had accepted the change, followed the rules, played the game as Wyatt called it. Why?

He frowned at the glowing monitor, brought up the browser, and searched for information on the Braden Institute. If they were no longer solvent, that would explain their desire for outside funding. A major discovery like the one he and Lauren had uncovered would stand a better chance of raising money, leaving funds available for the institute's other projects.

Thirty minutes later he hadn't discovered much that he didn't already know. The Braden Institute had been established in 1889 by Edmund and Leonora Braden. They set up a board of directors and returned to their world travels. Both were on the Titanic when it sank, but their legacy lived on. They were described as elegantly sophisticated, worldly charming. No pictures or grainy photographs of them existed.

He typed in a search for Liam and Viola Prentice, and all derivatives of their names. Again, nothing new. Both born in early 1940s: Liam in New York and Viola in California. He went to Princeton; she to Stanford. Graduated with honors. Met on a dig near Tikal and were married within the year. Accolades earned them high praise and recognition, but in 1973 they opted to remain stateside and lend their financial backing to others.

"So what happened in 1973?" he mumbled to himself.

He'd actually wondered about that on more than one occasion. The Prentices reportedly helped turn Maya history on its ear with their discoveries. They could have asked for anything from any organization and gotten it. Just like that, they quit. Even after a large inheritance left them the means to do whatever they wished.

"And if they quit, why jump back in now?" Especially if there were health issues for one of them, as Wyatt had indicated.

He frowned at the monitor and let his fingers dance over the keyboard, searching this lead and that and finding nothing noteworthy. They had no children, no siblings, no family remaining. Their good deeds were many; their faults...obviously not written about.

"Let's try 'archaeology 1973 Maya Yucatán Prentice.'" He poked the enter key. One thousand links came up. He scrolled through them until one title popped out: ARCHAEOLOGY WORLD MOURNS.

*November 15, 1973*

*The archaeology world mourns the loss of Bud and Marge Collier, whose dismembered bodies were recovered two days ago thirty miles from their most recent discovery. They and their party, consisting of protégés Liam and Viola Prentice, were attacked in the jungle while following clues to a new site.*

*"Soldiers came out of nowhere," Prentice reported from his hospital bed in Mexico City. "They waved rifles. Demanded drugs and money." Prentice was rendered unconscious when he attempted to help Collier, and sustained a skull fracture.*

*"When I came to," Prentice says, "Viola and I had been left for dead. We heard horrific, blood-curdling screams and crawled into the underbrush. Then we watched as they..."*

*Mr. Prentice was unable to continue, but the proof of the violence perpetrated on these beloved icons tells of the horror they all endured.*

*The Prentices were finally able to make their way to a small village and from there get help. Though battered, beaten, and broken, the Prentices are now listed in stable physical condition. Mrs. Prentice's psychological condition is guarded, and she is presently sedated.*

*Services are pending for the Colliers. Investigation is ongoing, but authorities are not hopeful for a resolution.*

*As for the Prentices, when asked when they will return to the work they love, Mr. Prentice's response was, "Never."*

Sebastian closed his eyes against the images flashing through his head. Yeah, that would pretty much put him off to going back, too.

Pulling in a deep breath, he ran a search on the Colliers. There wasn't much information on them, other than some of the papers they'd published on their discoveries.

They might have been icons at the time, but in today's world they were fairly obscure. A shame, really.

There were a few more articles about their deaths and subsequent funeral. People were outraged over the guerilla attack. Pictures showed Liam and Viola at the services, leaning heavily on each other, grief clear on their faces. Before and after photos of the couple told the story, too. The murder had aged them instantly. It was like looking at two different couples.

*Yeah, seeing your friends dismembered would do that.* They were lucky they got out alive.

So why go back after all these years? Maybe they had something to prove to themselves. Maybe it was a fear or nightmare they were determined to banish before their health made it impossible to do so.

Sebastian returned to his search on the Prentices, narrowing the focus to what he'd just learned. "Interesting," he murmured when the results popped up.

Braden Institute had offered them a position, which they refused. Weeks later another shock rippled through their community -- the Prentices were the Colliers' sole heirs. They'd been left millions. Some called it touching since the Colliers had no family. Others called it suspicious. At that point Sebastian didn't know what to believe. The Prentices vowed to do good with the inheritance and had...but there was no doubt they'd benefited as well.

"Okay, Wyatt, what little secrets are you hiding?"

Whatever they were, they were well hidden. Sebastian found nothing on the man except for a single listing on the institute's homepage as head of the institute.

On a whim, he googled himself. His life was splashed on screen for the world to see: Eagle Scout announcement, the news articles when his college soccer team won their division, articles he'd written, his thesis, archaeological achievements. A click on images and there he was again -- mostly with the artifacts he and Lauren had discovered.

Sebastian's frown deepened. Wyatt had accolades as well. He'd reportedly spent several years on sites before accepting the job at Braden Institute. Where was the detritus of his life? He searched again and went to images. At least something came up this time, but he couldn't say it was anything remarkable. Wyatt giving a lecture. Wyatt at the opening of the Prentice Museum. Wyatt awarding another grant. Everything was from the time he started with the institute, nothing earlier.

*It's all about winning...*

"Yeah, well, it would help to know what game's being played."

"What are you doing up?" Lauren's slipped her arms around his neck, and nibbled at his earlobe, then rested her chin on his shoulder.

He rubbed her arm. "I couldn't sleep. At some point I realized we know next to nothing about the Prentices, Wyatt, or even Braden Institute...just what we've been told."



Lauren shrugged. "Isn't that the way of most business relationships we've had?"

How did bagging groceries in high school possibly compare to this? "Since this is the first major job either of us has ever had, I can't say. We research what we discover, why not them?"

"I suppose." She dusted her fingers over his nipple. It tightened under the caress. "So what did you find?"

"It's very hard to concentrate when you do that."

She brushed her breasts against his back. "Mmm...try."

Her hand froze when he told her about the Collier tragedy. "I think that would be enough to keep me from going back. No wonder the Prentices are a little quirky. I'm sure they have a lot of guilt over the inheritance. They probably feel they shouldn't have survived the attack."

Sebastian agreed that was a feasible assumption. "I also couldn't find anything about Wyatt prior to his association with the institute. Nothing."

She laughed lightly. "Sweetheart, by your own words, not everything is on the Internet, and not everything that's on it is correct. If someone didn't know my maiden name, they wouldn't find anything about me prior to our marriage."

Sebastian loved those a-ha moments in archaeology whenever things started to click into place. Wyatt had said it himself -- he'd been after the Prentices for a long time. He hadn't meant financially.

"He's around our age," he said, more to himself than to Lauren. "He could have been a Collier grandchild. Just because no family was reported didn't mean none existed. I wonder if there's any record of the will being contested on a child's behalf."

"You'd think something like that would have been newsworthy since some suspicion had been cast on the Prentices."

She dusted her fingers down to his belly button and gently combed the hairs there, nudging his shorts lower and lower with every sweep. His hint of erection bloomed into full force, rising up to meet her. Sebastian resisted the urge to shove her hand around his cock, content to let her play.

"It was a different world then," he said through the lust starting to fog his brain. "Watergate and Vietnam were the news. Something like this would have been investigated, gossiped about."

Would there have been a local investigation since the murders occurred in Mexico? "He could be an undercover detective working a cold case." None of it explained why, or how, Wyatt had tried to get into his head earlier...if that's what had happened.

Lauren tugged his chair away from the table. "You watch too much *CSI* when we're home." She swung astride his lap and wiggled over his growing erection. "And here you are, slaving over your computer, when you've got a hot woman waiting in bed for you."

Sebastian cupped her butt and rocked her against him. "The hot woman was sound asleep...snoring even."

Lauren tossed back a laugh. "I do *not* snore."

"Why else would I have trouble sleeping?"

"Because you were hard and wanting me?" she shot back.

"The only safe answer for me is 'absolutely.'" One hand anchored on her ass, Sebastian swooped the other to her neck. The scratch there stopped him cold.

"This has gotten worse." He shoved her hair aside for a better look.

Lauren jerked away. "It's fine." She ground her crotch into him. "Come on. I'm really horny."

"And I'm really worried." He plucked her from his lap and pulled her hair back. "I think it's infected. Let's go into the bathroom. I want to see this in better light." He didn't give her a chance to refuse, steering her firmly in that direction.

Heaving a world-weary sigh, she stumbled forward and then plopped down on the toilet seat once they were wedged into their tiny bathroom. "We could be having killer sex right now. I'm having an extra horny night."

"So I've noticed." He combed her hair over her shoulder and studied the scratch under the brighter light. The welt hadn't diminished; neither had the redness. If anything, they were worse. "And normally I would have no problem fucking you until your toes curled, but this looks bad. It's red, swollen, and looks like it's starting to fester."

"That's ridiculous. It's only a couple of hours old. Geez, it's cold in here." She snapped a towel from the rack and wrapped it around her.

"I know what I see. Does this hurt?"

She winced when he probed the edges of the wound.

"A little. Feels like there's something in there."

"Let me clean it up so I can see."

While he pulled cotton balls and hydrogen peroxide from the cabinet under the sink, she tucked the towel in place and shifted to a more comfortable position.

"This is going to sting," he said as he soaked a cotton ball.

The tension in her shoulders spoke for her. With the first dab, she hissed through her teeth, but remained silent. The wound bubbled beneath the hydrogen peroxide. As he blotted it dry, Sebastian could see the shadow of something burrowed inside.

"I do see something." He swung open the medicine cabinet and grabbed her tweezers off the shelf. "Hold tight."

Sebastian had to coax the wound open a little more in order to grab the tip of whatever it was. Lauren's barely audible whimpers didn't make it easy. He hated hurting her, but there

was no way in hell he was going to let this go untreated. Either he was going to take care of it, or she'd find herself at the doctor first thing in the morning.

Finally, he had a solid grip. "Got it."

"No," she gasped out. "Stop! It burns!"

He steadied her with one hand on her shoulder while he continued to ease what looked like a serious splinter from her.

"I mean it, Sebastian! Stop! It feels like fire racing over me!"

"Shh...it's okay, baby." It had to hurt if she was saying something. There wasn't a more stalwart woman in the world. Nothing fazed her...except this. Hand shaking, he pulled the inch-long sliver of wood free.

Lauren doubled over, clutching her midsection. "God, I'm going to throw up." She crumpled to the floor and shoved the toilet lid up just in time.

Sebastian set the tweezers on the edge of the sink, wet a washcloth with cold water, and then pressed it to her forehead. Lauren collapsed into his arms when the bout of vomiting passed. He cuddled her close, bathing the cool cloth over her cheeks.

"Please don't ask if I'm pregnant," she said with a groan.

"I wouldn't have to ask. I'd know." He kissed her forehead. "Who's been asking?"

"Barry got pissy when I started feeling sick tonight. Said it would ruin everything."

"Now I know why you were so mad at him. Idiot. Anyone else?"

"Viola...she asked what he'd said when you were giving your lecture. When I told her, she asked if I was. She looked like I was contagious. Considering how my night's ended, maybe I am."

She jerked to the toilet to empty her stomach again, then sagged back into his arms. "Maybe I have food poisoning."

"With your cast-iron stomach? Not likely. Besides, if that was the case, I'd be sick, too. We ate the same things."

"I suppose." She curled her knees to her chest and snuggled deeper into his arms. "What the hell did you pull out of me? An arrow?"

"Pretty close. An inch-long sliver of wood. How in the hell could you not feel that going in?"

"The last time I was around any wood at all was when we uncrated the artifacts to prepare for the exhibit. Maybe I got it then, and the gouge from Viola's bracelet opened it up."

That would be the logical explanation. Viola had no reason to purposefully hurt Lauren. Viola's only threat would be Wyatt...if Sebastian's suspicions about the man were true. Seeing how chummy Wyatt was with the couple made more sense using these parameters. Why else would he be so affectionate with Viola if not to get as close to them as

possible? And yet for all outward appearances, the Prentices still left Wyatt out of the loop on their upcoming expedition, inviting him only when cornered.

Lauren hauled herself to the sink to rinse out her mouth. Sweat glistened on her pale skin. Her hands shook. It looked like it took all she had to stand there.

She pointed to the tweezers on the edge of the sink. "Hard to believe that little sliver felt like a burning two-by-four. I thought you were going to pull my insides out with it." She peered closer. "I don't think that's from a crate. Looks more like a thorn or a cactus needle."

"Or a dart?" The words came out of nowhere -- like a voice inside his head told him -- but the instant he said it, Sebastian knew that's what it was.

Lauren frowned at his reflection in the mirror. "Who would want to dart me, and why?"

That's what he intended to find out. He shut the toilet. "It's late, I'm worried about you, and I'm tired. Let my imagination play. Sit, and I'll finish cleaning this up."

Hands braced for balance, she eased down. "If we're going to let our minds wander aimlessly, let's at least pretend it's a poison dart."

For some reason, Sebastian had the sinking feeling there wasn't any pretending about it. Somehow he and Lauren had gotten drawn into all this, and he wasn't sure what *this* was. It started when the wealth of their dig was reported to the institute. From that point on, everything had moved at light speed. He wondered if they'd unwittingly stumbled upon evidence of the Collier murders. That would definitely be of interest to the persons who committed those crimes, and those seeking justice.

"How are you feeling?" Sebastian smoothed a gauze bandage into place over her wound.

Lauren twisted around to see, then gave up. "Beat, but I think my stomach's done revolting."

"Good." He kissed the top of her head. "Go tuck in and try to get some sleep."

Lauren started for the door. "You coming?"

"Soon...I've got a couple things to check out on the Internet first."

She gave a small laugh as she walked away. "Don't forget poison darts."

"Top of the list, sweetheart."

## Chapter Six

Lauren struggled to crawl from her nightmare. Knowing she was asleep and that's all it was didn't quell her fear. It all felt too real.

She was cold, wet. Light from thousands of flames glimmered around her, casting eerie shadows on the walls of wherever she was. She fisted wet sand, trying to pull herself further away from whatever threatened her.

Faces floated around her. Women's faces. All different, but saying the same thing, "*Hurry. Save yourself. Don't stop.*" Her life depended on reaching the portal of natural light ahead; a distance that looked like miles in her rapidly deteriorating state.

Hands clamped around her ankles and dragged her back. Lauren kicked, but the grip only tightened. Her heart pounded in her ears, drowning out the voices that encouraged her, leaving only one remaining.

*"Why do they always fight it?"*

Lauren snapped upright, a scream frozen in her throat as she woke up. It was morning. The scent of fresh brewed coffee called her name, but Lauren was still too rattled to move.

Deep breaths calmed her thudding heartbeat. She shoved her hair from her eyes and felt the bandage pull. Events from the night before filtered through the nightmare's panic. She'd woken horny as hell, desperate to find Sebastian to ease the ache. Instead he'd pulled a piece of wood from the curve of her neck. It'd hurt so bad Lauren had thought she was going to pass out. Next thing she knew, she was puking her guts out.

Grabbing the tape that held the bandage in place, she pulled it off and pressed her fingers against the wound. The bottom portion had started to mend and now felt no worse than a deep bruise. The deepest part at the top was still open and had left yellow residue on the gauze. She twisted around, trying to get a look at it, even contorting herself in front of the dresser mirror. The position of the wound made it impossible for her to see.

Stifling a groan, Lauren stumbled to the bathroom. Her muscles ached, and pain pounded in her head with every step she took. Her stomach roiled, and she prayed she wasn't going to start throwing up again.

As she sat on the toilet, she glanced toward the sink. The projectile that had speared her was now in a zipped plastic bag. Sebastian probably wanted it analyzed, since she was so sick last night. She swore he lived to solve mysteries. That's what made him such a great archaeologist.

She ran a toothbrush over her teeth and tossed down a couple of Tylenol, then grabbed her purple terrycloth robe from its hook on the back of the door. Just being wrapped in its depths was enough to make her want to curl up with a good book for the rest of the day and forget the world existed. Unfortunately, they had to make nice with the Prentices.

Knotting the belt, Lauren muttered a curse and stepped into the short hallway. She had a clear shot of the rest of their apartment from there -- the living room and kitchen were one room, divided only by where the light brown carpet ended and the tan linoleum began.

Sebastian was gone. The coffeemaker spurted the last drops into a fresh pot of coffee. A bag of cinnamon raisin bagels was open on the counter beside it. Her stomach growled. A note written with a black Sharpie was propped on his keyboard.

*Returning tux.*

*XOXOXOXOX*

Lauren glanced at the clock on the DVD player. Nine, and they had to be at the Prentices by eleven. She needed to shower and pack, neither of which was going to happen until she had a cup of coffee and something in her stomach.

She'd just sat down with a steaming mug and bagel when Sebastian walked in. He clutched the handle of a new slate blue suitcase.

"We're not going to the Prentices' with our clothes stuffed in duffel bags and backpacks." He swung the zippered overnighter onto the couch on his way to the kitchen.

Caught with her mouth full, Lauren managed to ask, "Is this part of playing the game?"

"Someone's playing something." Quick steps took him to her side. He peeled her robe away to look at the wound. "Not great, but better than it was last night. We'll put another bandage on it before we leave to keep it from breaking open." He dropped a kiss to her neck and covered her up. "The guy at the rental place found this in the shoulder padding."

He tossed a small plastic bag to the table. Normally used for shirt studs, this one contained a sliver of wood identical to the one he'd pulled from her the night before.

Lauren swallowed, then washed the lump of dough down with coffee. "I don't understand."

"That makes two of us," he mumbled.

She pinched off a bite of bagel and popped it in her mouth. "Most of what happened last night is fuzzy at best. Like my mind can't process whether it was real or a dream." She stopped short of telling him about her nightmare. The last thing she wanted to do was relive that.

"I could be a smart ass and tell you I'm crushed because I did some of my best work last night..."

She arched her eyebrow, implying he should go on.

"...but, great sex issue aside, I was more than worried about you when I saw how bad the scratch was and learned a dart was embedded --"

She sucked in a breath to tell him he was exaggerating, then continued to chew when he snapped up his palm to stop her.

"*Embedded* in you. You *begged* me to leave it there. You were nearly in tears, then threw up after it was over. That's not you."

All Lauren remembered was that it hurt like hell, and she'd gotten sick...and that he'd bathed her face and tucked her into bed afterward.

"And now I find another dart -- because that's exactly what it is -- in the shoulder padding of the tux I was wearing. And there's no doubt, based on how you were last night, that once I have both darts analyzed, I'll find poison on them."

Lauren didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She knew that's what he'd do, but it still made no sense. "Why? Who? Honey" -- she waved her hand around their tiny apartment -- "what could we possibly have that someone else would want? How could we be a threat to anyone?"

"I don't know." He scrubbed his hand down his face and strode to the coffee pot. "I've been up all night trying to figure it out. Maybe we know something we don't know we know. Maybe we found something we weren't supposed to find. Maybe --"

"Maybe you need some sleep."

She watched his shoulders sag as he braced his hands on the counter. He looked...defeated. He jerked around to the table, one giant step at best in their small kitchen, and tapped the hibernate key on his laptop. His monitor came to life.

"I thought our site might be in the same vicinity as where the Colliers were murdered in 1973." The chair legs squeaked on the linoleum as he plopped down. "It isn't."

Lauren scooted her chair nearer to him and dusted her fingers over his shoulders. "And if it was, so what? Hurting us wouldn't do anything. What about the people who work with us? They know as much as we do. Are these mysterious people going to kill everyone?"

"Everyone in the Collier party was killed, except the Prentices."

She'd give him that one. "Let me see what you've got." She canted the laptop her way to see the monitor. He had pretty close to a hundred browser windows open, counting tabbed sites within each. Well, maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration, but he had a lot open. He was clearly obsessed with finding answers.

Sebastian framed her with his body. "There's not much on the Prentices after the murders. In March of 1975 information starts again with talk of building the museum, establishing scholarship funds, charitable organizations. From that point on it's like a dam burst, with one article after the other."

Lauren clicked on the tabs and images he'd pulled up. The before and after picture of Viola Prentice haunted her. This was a woman who'd been through hell. Her posture and the stark hollows of her cheeks were proof of that. In the pre-murder pictures she and Liam were the happy couple -- always standing close, always smiling, love beaming from their eyes. The after pictures showed physical and emotional distance between them. They wouldn't, or couldn't, look at each other.

"The guerillas killed the Colliers, but not the Prentices," she said.

"If that's the truth."

Lauren tapped her finger against the screen. "Sweetheart, look at this woman. She's been traumatized, beaten...maybe even raped."

Sebastian stared at the picture, mouth agape. "She was pregnant."

There was that word again. It'd come up a lot in the last twenty-four hours. In this case, Sebastian had come to the same conclusion she had.

Lauren curled her fingers over his forearm. "It would explain why they might have disappeared for a year. She went off to have the baby."

A new frown furrowed his brow. "Where is it?"

Lauren shrugged. "A child of rape? She may have given it up for adoption, or maybe it was stillborn."

"Or maybe it's Wyatt."

They looked at each other at the same time.

"He's the right age," she admitted. "And he has a Hispanic look about him. And it would really explain why he's so kissy-face with her. You kiss your mom."

"That would mean Viola knows he's her son."

"Adoptees often try to make contact with their biological parents. Knowing he's her son and being accepted are two different things."

Sebastian tsked. "Which is why being invited on this expedition was so important to him. He said he's been after them a long time..."

"Because he wants their acceptance," they finished together.

"That doesn't explain us being darted," he said with a scowl.



She rested her chin on his shoulder. "I was sick when you said that, and you were worried. I'd say we both let paranoia get away with us. We've been unpacking crates and are bound to have gotten more than a few splinters from the pine boxes...some of which would have wound up here."

"You were sick, throwing up, in pain because of one of those." He pointed to the splinter from the tux. "Pain, Lauren, screaming pain. Explain that."

She couldn't. "People get sick, sweetheart. Just because I rarely do doesn't mean I never will." She cupped his cheek and brushed her thumb over his morning whiskers. "As for the pain...isn't it conceivable that it hit a nerve?"

He gave a humorless snort. "Yeah...it's conceivable."

"You've been up all night worried and tired." She kissed him gently and butted her forehead to his. "Go grab an hour's sleep while I get us packed."

She expected him to argue. Instead he nodded, kissed her palm, and walked to their room.

Lauren poured a second cup of coffee and sipped it while she clicked through the sites Sebastian had found the night before. It was an impressive amount of work, so typical of his thoroughness when he was researching a puzzle. That attention to detail was going to get them the funding they needed to return to the site. Only a fool would ignore his genius.

"And that's a proud wife talking," she said to herself.

She slugged down the rest of her coffee, bookmarked his pages, and turned off the computer. All the greatness in the world wouldn't be enough if they were late to the Prentices.

Her gaze wandered to the tuxedo splinter. She retrieved the other one from the bathroom and laid both plastic bags side by side. They were uniform in shape and size, too perfect to be random splinters of wood.

She held them up against the morning light. They looked smooth, polished with a red-brown patina. Or was that blood? The notion made her laugh. Now whose imagination was running amok?

"Don't throw those splinters away," he shouted from the bedroom, "just in case it's not a stomach thing you've got going. I'm going to have them analyzed on Monday."

She snickered. He was determined, she'd give him that. "I wouldn't dream of it," she shouted back. "You're like a dog with a bone."

"Speaking of bones..."

"Are you going to take a nap, or do I have to come in there?"

"How much time do we have?"

She glanced at the clock. "Not much."

"I can be quick."

Lauren laughed. "That's not a rousing endorsement, you know."

"Our little jade friend is prepared for backup. You know, we could take a shower together and save time."

Considering the size of their bathroom... "That would be a tight fit."

"Thank you, honey. So...are you coming or what?"

"You tell me." Lauren peeled off her robe, trailing it behind her as she walked into the bedroom. The idol was perched on the pillow beside him.

Sebastian's grin widened when he saw her. She matched it with one of her own and crawled onto the bed...and him, sealing them in a single plunge.

"Watch and learn little friend," she told the idol.

## Chapter Seven

Every rumor Sebastian had ever heard about the Prentice estate was true -- you had to see it to believe. Even for a lush home in the San Diego area it surpassed the norm. Photos of the home, designed to resemble a nineteenth century rancho, didn't capture the true magnificence of the sprawling house and grounds that surrounded it.

Italian cypresses stood sentry on either side of the road that wound its way to the crown jewel at the top of the gently sloping hill. Lush green grass was interspersed with California pepper trees, eucalyptus, and honey mesquite trees whose towering branches bragged they'd been here longer than the owners, and would remain here long after they'd gone.

The landscape flattened the higher Sebastian drove. Twenty acres that were a kingdom of its own. In one sweeping glance, Sebastian was able to see an orchard so dense it could have been a forest. Trees were heavy with oranges, lemons, grapefruit, and peaches, all ready to be picked. A vegetable garden was about a hundred yards away and covered another acre.

Then there was a garden tucked closer to the house, a near replica of the museum's meditation garden. Lady Banks vined through the tops of five gazebos, connecting them all and providing shade to anyone strolling through. One gazebo stood at the center with the other four set at each cardinal direction -- a *quincunx*. Even from his ground position, Sebastian recognized the attempt to recreate the ancient Maya five-point design. He wasn't sure how precise this was or even if it was intentional, but he rather liked the nod the Prentices gave to the Maya creation myth.

Brown stucco and matching tile roof blended the two-story house with rock from the surrounding hillsides. A deep-set balcony ringed the outside of the second floor. Two outbuildings were the only other structures. One was obviously a six-car garage, since the

door was open and the vehicles -- five vintage, one brand new -- were clearly on display. The other building was closer to the gardens and most likely contained equipment for that.

Lauren snapped up; her spine popped. "Is that the pool?" She pointed toward the back of the house, but he'd already driven beyond that point and couldn't see.

The road fanned out to a wide apron of cobblestones that circled a bubbling fountain. Two vehicles were parked there so he and Lauren weren't the first to arrive, and not the last, since Wyatt was coming up behind them.

Sebastian pulled their sad old van in place behind an equally sad looking '65 purple Mustang they would've recognized anywhere.

"Mike and Michelle Sutton are here," Lauren said. "Good. At least the Prentices were serious when they said they wanted a top team, but I can't see the Suttons leaving the Bonampak site any time soon."

And yet they, like Sebastian and Lauren, were here. Tempted by the carrot of funding, or the lure of a unique expedition for their resumes? Mike and Michelle were knowledgeable, thorough, and ambitious. Yet they'd never grasped for opportunities that could have been tugged their way. This venture -- or rather, the person who offered it -- obviously intrigued them enough to step outside their comfort zone. Sebastian looked forward to working with them again.

"Who do you suppose the other car belongs to?" She indicated a brand new blue Honda Accord with dealer plates.

Sebastian shrugged as he cut the engine. "Not a clue. I can't even begin to guess who Liam invited."

"Do you think we were an afterthought, like Wyatt?"

She raked her hair into a ponytail and secured it with a pink scrunchie that matched her capris. She'd topped them with a white sleeveless blouse that brought out the golden glow in her skin. With the ponytail now swinging down her back, she looked billboard-ready for a "Visit California" ad. He glanced down at his own white pullover and tan trousers. Yep, he was ready to pose for Old Navy.

"Wyatt cornered them into an invitation," he said. "We didn't. Liam sought us out."

"True. If what we think is true, I feel for Wyatt. I sure hope he gets what he wants from this."

Sebastian didn't know what to think or feel about Wyatt's supposed situation. He might have been more sympathetic if it hadn't been for his niggling feeling that Wyatt had tried to get inside his head at the party. It didn't make sense, but Sebastian still felt invaded.

"I hope we get what we want from this," he said as he opened the van door.

"Definitely. At least we'll be spending the weekend in style. Can you believe this place?" She swung out of the van to soak in the view.

It was breathtaking, he had to admit. Whoever had designed the place had taken advantage of the large natural depression at the top of the hill. No one could see in from the bottom, but those standing here could see everything.

White sails skidded over the blue ocean and into the safety of Mission Bay, away from a line of thunderstorms churning to shore. The bustle of San Diego spread below, yet none of the sound intruded on the peace up here. Looking out, Sebastian could also see the Prentice Museum perched on its own little hilltop several miles away. Sunlight beaming off its large windows made it impossible to miss. But considering the rate of the storms heading in, it wouldn't be sunny for long.

"My God, Sebastian," Lauren said in a rush of breath. "It's all so beautiful."

She stood there, arms crossed, eyes wide. Again it made him wonder if he was giving her the life she deserved. Not that they could afford all this, but they could have better. They had money, were paid nicely, and did nothing, got nothing, with it because they were always on the go. They could settle permanently in the states rather than live a vagabond existence. They'd both been offered teaching positions at a number of universities. At one point, he'd even been offered the very job Wyatt now held.

He lifted his hand in greeting as the other man unfolded himself from his Ford Escape. Wyatt waved back and walked their way, tucking his dark sunglasses in the pocket of his red golf shirt as a stray cloud from the storm passed overhead.

"Good morning." Wyatt's gaze fell to the white gauze on Lauren's neck. "All that for a scratch?"

She pulled the scrunchie from her hair and let it fall over her shoulders to hide the bandage. "Let's just say it got worse."

"How much worse?" He pushed her hair back and reached for the tape.

Sebastian plucked his hand away. "I pulled a one-inch dar..." A sidelong glare from Lauren ordered him to amend the word. "...sliver of wood from it last night."

Wyatt's lips tightened. "We need to make sure you got it all out. I have a salve that's been in my family for generations, guaranteed to draw out any residue."

Sebastian was about to ask what business it was of his when the front door swung open, and Viola breezed out in a yellow swimsuit. A blue silk wrap knotted around her waist let her thigh play peek-a-boo with the world. It wasn't a pretty image. Her skin was tanned to the consistency of leather -- dark, thick, wrinkled. What looked like orange juice filled the champagne glass she held aloft.

"Wonderful! You're here. Rosa and Mannie will help with your luggage and show you to your rooms. We're all by the pool. Hurry and change into your swimsuits. Mimosas are flowing, and everything's ready for you to help yourselves."

Two servants swooped in from out of nowhere the second Viola ducked inside. They made no eye-contact, no acknowledgement of any kind. They retrieved the suitcases from their vehicles and led them to the house.

The three of them had to walk fast to keep up.

“Alcohol and a swimming pool, there’s a good mix,” he whispered against Lauren’s ear.

She snickered and elbowed his ribs.

They stepped from the bright sunlight into the dimmer interior. A sea of beige greeted them. Left and right turns led to the main area of the house. But the feature that captured a person’s focus was the sweeping staircase that urged visitors forward.

Mahogany banisters gleamed next to the cushion of beige carpeting. It led up to a portal of deep blue before spreading out into two separate landings, like the wings of a beautiful bird.

Mannie and Rosa never paused. Sebastian couldn’t say the same of him, Lauren, or Wyatt. They followed the servants up, footsteps muted by the floor covering, up into the midnight blue. Then they reached the top...and Sebastian was truly awestruck.

“Oh, my God.” Lauren gasped. “It’s the Milky Way.”

Sebastian picked out Orion, the Pleiades, and Gemini, all beautifully reproduced and lighted in the mural overhead.

A strangled sound from Wyatt pulled Sebastian’s attention toward the man. Recessed lighting tucked under the railing illuminated the floor, but didn’t detract from the view overhead. It was enough to see Wyatt’s agonized features turned to the faux sky.

“Wow...it looks like a forest grotto.”

Lauren’s voice yanked Sebastian’s focus to her. She stared over the rail to the floor twenty feet below. A hot tub bubbled gently in the center. Trees, shrubs, ferns, and flowering plants were tucked around the periphery and backlit with soft yellow lighting hidden behind them. Tables and captain chairs looked to be carved from stone.

Wyatt shoved away from the rail. “My room,” he choked out. “I need my room.”

“This way, sir,” Mannie said.

Wyatt stumbled along in his wake.

Lauren wove her arm through Sebastian’s. “We should get to our room, too. We don’t want to keep them waiting.”

He could tell by the tone of her voice that she felt Wyatt’s pain just as he did.

“There’s nothing we can do,” she whispered.

That was doubly true, since he and Lauren were only speculating as to the source of that pain.

They followed Rosa along the circular landing, gazes torn between the overhead star view and the secluded grotto below. The more his eyes became accustomed to the dark, the

more immersed Sebastian became in the illusion that they were in the Yucatán enjoying the stars after a day of digging. A shaft of light shattered the moment.

“Your room.” Rosa stepped to one side to let them enter.

Two impressions hit Sebastian at once. First, the room was bigger than their whole apartment, and that was excluding the huge bathroom he saw off to the side. Second, another sea of beige met his gaze.

While he and Lauren stared at the king-sized bed piled with pillows and tried not to look like hicks, Rosa swung their one rolling suitcase onto the luggage rack. He was extra glad he’d thought to buy one.

“Shall I unpack for you?” she asked.

Lauren swung toward the door. “Thank you, but we can get it.”

“I’ll be waiting on the landing to escort you down. It’s easy to lose your way in a place like this.” Rosa tilted a nod to them and left.

Lauren shut the door behind her and then sagged into it, speechless. He’d never seen her eyes so wide. A glance in the wall-size mirror over the dresser showed his were just as big. It was impossible to not be impressed.

He wandered into the adjoining bathroom where a garden tub plus separate shower with double heads were nearly lost in the space. Lightbulbs rimmed another big mirror over two sinks. A bidet sat next to the toilet.

“Lauren’s going to love this.” He walked back to the bedroom to tell her about the new possible play toy, and found her sprawled on the massive bed, stretching like a cat.

“Lay down.” She patted the space beside her. “It feels like heaven. I could curl up and sleep for days.”

He propped himself against the doorjamb. “There’s a bidet in the bathroom.”

Lauren shoved her elbows under her. “Really?”

“I see that woke you up,” he said with a laugh. “We’d better get downstairs. I promise we can indulge ourselves later.”

“As long as you promise.” She hugged her knees to her chest as she sat up. “Anything to get this over with so we can go home. I’m feeling...off all of a sudden.”

“Sick again?” He sat down beside her and peeled the bandage away. It hadn’t improved. “It’s seeping at the top. Maybe I didn’t get it all. If Wyatt has a salve to draw it out --”

She pressed the bandage into place. “It’s fine. And it makes a good excuse for staying out of the pool.”

“Would you like to stay up here and rest for a while?” Her eyes looked glazed, her skin too warm for his liking.

Lauren smoothed her hand over the oh-so soft bed, then shook her head. “No...I...no...I’m ready.”

He patted her knee and gave her a hand up. "We don't have to stay. We don't have to do this."

She nestled her head on his shoulders. "Yeah, we do, and we both know that, too."

True. There was more at stake here than themselves. They had team members depending on funding, waiting even as he and Lauren stood here to get the word to go to the dig or look for work elsewhere. And with the season in Central America already starting, work elsewhere would be scarce.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wyatt sagged against the bedroom door. The sky-view mocked and tormented him. That the Prentices would choose to commemorate that night in such a way carved another hole in his heart to match the one put there so long ago.

Ka-ra had noticed as well. He'd seen her soul reflected in Lauren's light brown eyes. Could feel Ka-ra's fear and sadness intermingled with Lauren's confusion. It had taken all the will he possessed not to wrap his arms around her and tell her all was well, that he'd never leave her again.

He squeezed his eyes closed against the image of his suitcase perched on the small luggage rack. The ointment was inside. All he had to do was take it to the Garners and make sure he insisted Lauren use it on her wound. It was the only thing that could dissolve the ancient ceiba wood now rooted in her neck -- the only thing that could save Lauren. Doing so would take Ka-ra away from him again. Wyatt didn't think he could bear the loss a second time.

"I'm here, my love," he whispered.

She reached his mind, confused as much as Lauren. Wanting. Needing. Aching. How could he deny her...or himself?

He probed Sebastian's mind. Blocked by whatever totem he possessed.

*Remove it*, he told Ka-ra. *I must have you.*

Ka-ra's breath caught in Lauren's body. He watched as if he hovered above the couple. Ka-ra's form was the hint of a white wisp around the other woman's body. She glanced up to the ceiling, seeing him. Her lips parted, eyes closed on a sigh when Sebastian kissed Lauren's throat.

Lauren wrapped her arms around Sebastian's neck, molding her body against him.

*Remove it*, he told Ka-ra again.

Lauren hands skittered down Sebastian's chest. He heard the zipper rasp as she zipped it open. Grabbing his trousers, she tugged them down with his shorts. His erection surged into her hands.



Growling like he was one of Wyatt's own, Sebastian yanked her pink capris down. Lauren hastily pulled her feet free and edged backward with him, aiming for the massive bed. He tugged his legs free from his clothes, losing his shoes in the process. The barrier cleared!

Wyatt shot into Sebastian's mind. Burning need engulfed him. He shoved Lauren/Ka-ra onto the bed and slammed into her heat.

Wyatt stroked his own erection as the body his mind possessed pounded into her. Though not there physically, he still felt her cunt tighten, demanding more, more, more. Sebastian shoved his hand between their bodies, pushing into her clitoris with every stroke.

Wyatt's balls hugged his body. He remembered how Ka-ra had licked them...in both human and jaguar form. He sent the memory to the writhing couple. Ka-ra arched Lauren's body higher. He could feel them coming...all of them...together.

Wyatt cupped his hand over the head of his cock to contain the spray as jism seared from him. It poured down his length, soaked his clothes, and left his knees trembling.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lauren blinked up at Sebastian. What the hell had just happened? They were supposed to be down at the pool, not going at it like teenagers on prom night.

He rested his head on her chest, pulling in slowing breaths while she combed lazy fingers through his hair.

"Now I feel like I need a nap," he mumbled against her breast.

"We really know how to make a good impression, don't we? I can only imagine what's going through Rosa's mind right now."

"I know." He pulled his head up. His eyes looked...different...haunted, like in the garden the night before. And though they'd just had some killer sex, he didn't look all that happy about it.

"I don't like that atrium," she confessed. "It gives me the creeps." Though it had initially taken her breath away and filled her with wonder, that feeling drifted away when she'd seen the agony on Wyatt's face. She'd felt his pain down to her bones...and it scared her.

"It's not real." He brushed his finger over her cheek. "Like the museum patio. It lacks...life."

That was it. Lauren offered him a weak smile. "We'd better go."

He nodded, pulled free, and gave her a hand up. In less than a minute they were ready to go.

Despite realizing why the atrium unsettled her, Lauren couldn't dismiss her apprehension. She tried not to clutch at Sebastian when they left the room, but did stay as

close as she could without appearing to do so. Rosa said nothing when they stepped out without the requested swimsuit attire. She merely nodded and led the way.

Lauren kept her gaze focused forward, not on the fantastic view in the center. This scene scared her. She wanted to burrow into the haven of Sebastian's arms and never let go.

Lighting at her feet reminded Lauren of torches set in the ground, guiding them down a dark, dangerous forest path. She felt rather than heard movement and looked up to see Wyatt prowling a slow path at the head of the stairs where he waited for them. They weren't the only ones who'd opted not to change -- though he had changed clothes. His gaze snapped up, frightening in its intensity, liquid gold, raw hunger...for her. Lauren's body answered back, craving him against her will.

This time she did clutch at the lifeline Sebastian's presence offered, lacing her quivering fingers through his. He squeezed back, giving the support she needed without question.

His jaw clenched, his hand muscles flexed under the force of their clasp. He'd seen Wyatt's interest, too, and obviously didn't appreciate it.

Lauren didn't understand the change in Wyatt. They'd been working together for six months. There hadn't been the slightest hint from him that he viewed her as anything other than a colleague. No subtle touches, no longing glances, no inappropriate words.

All that changed when he arrived at the museum last night. She'd seen it then, but that look in his eyes didn't sink in until now. Was it because he'd seen her dressed to the nines? Had he smelled her arousal and wanted her for himself? That seemed implausible at best. And why was her body stirring for him? That bothered her more than his blatant perusal.

"Not swimming today?" Wyatt asked as they neared.

Sebastian's fingers woven through hers gave Lauren the anchor she needed. "Not today."

Wyatt's gaze finally left her, wandering to the stars overhead. "I love the water and to swim. But not here. Not in this place."

He turned down the stairs. Rosa and Mannie darted ahead to lead the way.

They descended in unison, no one speaking. With each step Lauren's unease lessened, but it still floated just below the surface of her emotions. One room melded into another, all beige and nondescript. A wash of green finally broke the monotony of no color.

Her sandals tapped against slate gray tile now, a welcome sound after their hushed footsteps over the deep pile carpeting. A plant-filled sunroom transitioned slowly to the patio outside. Voices reached her; Viola's laughter, a splash as someone jumped into the pool. She caught the view through the profusion of green and saw tables laden with covered dishes tucked against the wall of the deep-set porch. A circle of chairs, loungers, and smaller tables lay ahead, all padded in sky blue and hugging the edge of the shade.

Having successfully delivered them, Mannie and Rosa parted for other duties. Heads turned their way. Mike and Michelle Sutton had the prime spots beside Liam and Viola. It seemed impossible that their hair could have gotten any blonder since Lauren had seen them a year ago. Someone once tried to nickname them Surfer Dude and Beach Bunny. It wasn't appreciated, but it'd been damn funny at the time and still appropriate today.

Michelle stood when she saw them and hurried their way with a welcoming smile. Mike was close behind, beating Liam's attempt to rush forward. Neither of them sported a swimsuit. In fact, Liam had a Hugh Hefner thing going with peach-colored silk pajamas, which was appropriate since the pool looked like it belonged at the Playboy Mansion.

A thin layer of fog hovered over the surface, swirled but not broken by the couple cavorting there -- Trina Tate and Jeremy Gibson.

Wyatt nodded a greeting to Liam, sidestepped the reunion, and pulled up a chair next to Viola, sitting as close as possible. The woman preened at the attention, openly flirting. Wyatt accepted every not-so-subtle caress of her fingers, seemed to enjoy the view of cleavage she flashed, even smiled when she flashed a coy look that suggested they go elsewhere. This was not a mother-son relationship.

"So much for our theory on that," Sebastian whispered.

At least part of their theory. Viola and Liam's unexplained absence all those years ago still could have meant she'd borne a child, but Wyatt clearly wasn't it.

Sebastian stuck his hand out to Mike. The two shook hands, backslapped each other, and hugged as Mike fired questions his way. "How was it last night? Was it great? How does the exhibit look? Did a lot of people attend? I wish we could have been there."

That would have been nice. But Barry wanted no other archaeologists to detract attention from the Garners, not even those on the institute's payroll.

"We were green when we'd heard you were selected to do this exhibit. But you clearly deserved it for finding a new site." Michelle's arms locked around Lauren with a little too much force for her liking. "Trina and Jeremy are here," she whispered.

"So I see." As they spoke, Trina climbed from the pool and slinked their way. Lauren swore the woman moved in slow motion. Water sluiced from her perfect figure, cascading from her double-Ds like Niagara Falls. Her hourglass body was barely contained by the black bikini. Long black hair shimmered like black gold down her back. She was tan, tall, gorgeous, and smart. And not one of Michelle's favorite people, since Trina had Mike before her...and again during a brief break-up. Trina had a professional aggressiveness unparalleled in their field and the brains to back it up. She was also a man-eater...and headed straight for Sebastian.

Thankfully, her constant companion and presumed boyfriend, Jeremy Gibson, leaped from the water with a *whoop* of joy and cut her off, slinging water everywhere and on everybody in his over-the-top boyish enthusiasm to greet them. What he lacked in intelligence and looks, he made up for in personality. His wiry brown hair defied a comb and

was perpetually tousled. When properly challenged -- told what to do -- he worked hard and steady. If not, he could be found on the nearest cot napping, which made him and Trina a good match. She liked giving orders, and he needed constant guidance. Lauren could understand Trina making the Prentices' list of elite team members, but Jeremy?

"Hail, hail, the gang's all here." Trina's gaze riveted on Wyatt. "Who's your yummy-looking friend?"

"Your boss." Sebastian grinned when her lecherous smile faded. They were all employed by Braden Institute. It was the one thing they had in common, other than their united interest in Maya civilizations.

Trina drew a line down the column of her throat as she watched him flirt with Viola. "I didn't realize Wyatt Caldwell was so young."

"What happened?" Michelle tapped Lauren's shoulder, indicating the bandage at the curve of her neck and effectively ignoring Trina as she always did.

Liam's gasp sucked in the atmosphere. He wedged himself into the center of their group. "Is that from Viola's bracelet?"

Lauren ducked his hand when he reached for the bandage. What was with everyone wanting to see it? Of course, in his situation he might be concerned about a possible lawsuit from injury.

"It's fine," she said. "I have it covered to keep my hair from irritating it."

"And I see you've opted for no swimming." He smiled at them over the rim of his mimosa. "I told Viola not everyone is the sun goddess she is. And with that storm building, I can't say the pool is the safest place to be. She never wants to listen to me."

"Oh, Liam, do stop going on about the weather. You're starting to sound like a dottering old-timer," Viola said from her throne. "I promise we'll move everything to the atrium at the first glimmer of lightning, rumble of thunder, or kiss of a raindrop."

He bowed at the waist. "Thank you, my love." The look in his eyes belied the endearment...and shifted to a definite glare when Jeremy bounded up, slinging water everywhere like a happy puppy.

Trina snagged the waistband of his swim trunks and yanked him to a stop. At least Jeremy had the common sense to realize the faux pas he'd nearly made, though he didn't apologize.

Liam dismissed him with a scathing once-over, then motioned to Mannie and Rosa. "Mimosas for everyone." He waved his guests to the chairs. "Sit, relax."

"What did you think of our atrium?" Viola slathered more suntan lotion over her legs.

"It's beautiful." Sebastian selected a chaise lounge at the farthest end of the circle. Lauren chose the chair beside it. Their colleagues filled the seats around them, leaving the Prentices and Wyatt to their own little grouping. It was a division typical of all gatherings.

People naturally clumped with others they knew. In this instance, the Prentices might consider it rude and screaming of suspicion. Lauren preferred thinking of it as a united front.

"It reminds me of a *cenote*." Trina stretched onto her lounge and plucked a glass from the tray of mimosas Mannie brought to her side.

Lauren nodded her agreement and also took a glass. She and Sebastian had the opportunity one season as interns to explore the cenotes. The underground cave pools and rivers had been formed millions of years ago after a meteorite impacted Earth in the Yucatán area. They were beautiful...a magical world unto themselves, and an excellent source of water in a land too porous to retain surface water. It was no wonder the Maya revered them. It was also a damned frightening place when the lights went out.

Viola's laughter tittered over them again. It was starting to annoy Lauren. The more she heard it, the phonier it sounded.

"That's exactly what it is!" She passed the lotion to Wyatt and turned her back to him. The order was clear. So was the grimace that flashed over his face.

Viola leaned into each rub of lotion, too clearly enjoying the attention. "Liam and I were fortunate to have seen one in our younger years," she said. "It impressed us so much, we had to reproduce one here. Have all of you seen one?"

Perched on the end of Michelle's lounge, Mike leaned forward, dangling his glass between his fingers. "Michelle and I have never been in that area. We've spent all our years at Bonampak."

"You may have your chance sooner than you think." Viola hid a smirk behind a sip of her drink and eased back in her seat, dismissing Wyatt in the process.

The man frowned at his oily hands, then thanked Mannie with a smile when the servant offered him a wet cloth.

Liam's knees cracked as he stood. Raising his glass, he centered himself as much as he could between the two knots of people. "Now that we all have our drinks, let's toast to our new enterprise."

"If it's all the same to you," Sebastian sat his drink on the little round bistro table beside him, "I think we'd all like to know what the enterprise is before we toast to anything."

No one moved. Even the breeze had jerked to a standstill. Liam stared at Sebastian, the shock at being challenged etched into the lines that seemed to suddenly appear on his face. Sebastian met his stare calmly, not giving a millimeter.

"I think I'd like to know that as well," Wyatt said. "You've got six of Braden Institute's best archaeologists gathered here, Liam. Tell me...are you planning to steal them?" He rolled his glass stem between his thumb and forefinger, his gaze locked on Liam as well.

Viola's laughter cut through the tension. She curled her fingers over Wyatt's knee. "Gentlemen, please. You'll have to excuse Liam. We are overly excited about this. I'd hoped we could enjoy each other's company before getting into the specifics of our proposal."

“I see. What happened to business before pleasure?” Sebastian asked, attempting a smile of his own.

“My dear young man, when you get to be our age, you learn it’s always pleasure first.” Viola slipped one leathery leg over the other.

A flash of lightning defied her. She frowned at the sky. Liam merely laughed.

“I told you so. You never want to listen. Let’s move this into the atrium, ladies and gentlemen. But before we do --” He raised his glass once more. “A toast to possibilities.” He curved an eyebrow Sebastian’s way. “I presume that’s acceptable for the moment?”

Sebastian lifted his glass. “To possibilities.”

One by one the others followed.

## Chapter Eight

Lauren tagged behind everyone else when they moved to the Prentices' atrium. Her apprehension grew with every step. Something about the place made her wary, and it wasn't because of her one experience in the cenote when the lights had failed them. She felt threatened, closed in, just as she had at the museum. This time she couldn't blame it on the champagne in the orange juice either. She'd taken the barest of sips to get past the protocols of Liam's toast. Sebastian hadn't drunk his either.

A corridor made of stone opened off the patio and led to the interior. A small waterfall blocked the exit ahead. As they neared, it turned off.

"Motion detector." Mike pointed to a red light low in the rock façade.

One by one they walked to the other side underneath the turned off falls. Lauren breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the night view had been replaced by the pinks, golds, purples, and blues of sunrise.

"It cycles through a full day every two hours," Liam explained.

Even as he said it the sky brightened with morning light. It reminded her of Disneyland, and if she could keep telling herself that, maybe that would be enough to keep the inexplicable panic attacks away.

"Please help yourselves to the food. Let's relax and get to know one another."

Mannie and Rosa had quickly reset the buffet. Lauren didn't know how they managed with just the two of them. At least she hadn't noticed any other servants around. Tantalizing scents of breakfast reached her this time, where before the outside air had carried them away.

Stone tables and captain-style chairs were carved smooth for comfort, or as comfortable as one could get in a stone chair. They'd been shoved together, eliminating any chance for group segregation this time.

The waterfall trickled back to life. Mimosas were gone, replaced with pitchers of fruit-filled iced tea set in a tray of crushed ice.

In a scene reminiscent of the night before, they shuffled into place at the buffet. This time Liam and Viola dispatched their servants to bring them plates. The them/us division had been turned full circle. It was funny in a way, being put so subtly in their places. But the Prentices' act had been intentional; their own and that of their colleagues had been subconscious.

Lauren tried to gather some inner peace. The lighting change helped, though she tried not to think about what she'd do when the night scene returned. At least she wasn't sick like she'd been the night before. But the scratch burned more. She longed to rip the bandage away and let it breathe fresh air. Doing so, though, would bring attention she didn't want.

Breakfast was the same as one would get at any restaurant buffet. A person could go with a heavy meal -- bacon, eggs, biscuits, French toast -- or fresh fruit and yogurt. She presumed the fruit came from the Prentices' own orchard.

In minutes everyone was gathered at the tables, laughing, talking. As if they did this every day. As if they didn't have a care in the world. As if they didn't wait for the bait the Prentices dangled so expertly.

What were the others thinking? Waiting for another cue from Sebastian? Were they here for funding as well? If so, what did that say about the stability of the Braden Institute?

She glanced up at the man sitting across from her. Wyatt studied them all. Wondering or hoping one would jump ship? Then his gaze fell on her. Something deep in her mind again responded to Wyatt in a way Lauren didn't want. Something that pulled her toward him. She couldn't breathe, couldn't push another morsel of food past her constricted throat. She lifted her iced tea and leaned back, cutting off eye contact as she sipped.

Sebastian's hand over her thigh breached the distance the stone chairs enforced. Her turmoil subsided. The voice whispering in her head dissipated. But the heat rushing her blood didn't. She channeled it her husband's way, remembering last night in the garden, their ménage with the idol...the idol Wyatt had helped him make.

Lauren squeezed her eyes shut at the image that invoked. He was in her head, touching her there, intruding as he'd done in the garden. She slammed Sebastian's face between them, soaking her thoughts with *his* scent, *his* touch, the way he felt in and on her.

A smile opened her eyes once more. Wyatt acknowledged his banishment with a barely perceptible nod. Sebastian squeezed her thigh. Had he felt it, too? It helped to know he was prepared to fight for her on any plane, as crazy as that sounded.

"Liam..."

The older man lifted an expectant gaze Sebastian's way.

"I notice you've touched on the Maya creation myth twice. The quincunx in the garden and the view overhead." He wagged his finger toward the ceiling.



Liam's chest puffed with pride. "I've forgotten how pleasant it feels to have one of my own kind recognize that. It's such a bore explaining it over and over again. Being away from archaeology as long as we've been, Viola and I miss the type of interaction one gets from colleagues in the know. Thank you for mentioning it. The house, too, is designed in the form of the quincunx, with the atrium being the center point."

Viola sniffed. "Most people focus on the old-time rancho exterior and never much beyond that point. Except for the grandeur here, of course."

"I think the Colliers would be pleased to see what you've done with the place."

Sebastian managed to smack the smiles right off their faces with that comment. Lauren put them down as officially screwed for funding.

Liam stabbed his fork into a piece of honeydew and dredged it through the remains of yogurt on his plate. "It feels odd hearing their name from someone else after all these years. No one says it around us."

"They've either forgotten them, or they're so afraid I'll have another nervous breakdown they don't want the hint of a whisper to leave their lips." Viola folded her napkin onto the table and stared at the landing above. "It was a horrible thing to go through, horrible to live with after the fact, seeing them murdered, ripped to..."

Liam wrapped his hand over hers. Lauren had to admit it was the first honest emotion she'd seen from them.

"Those murderers took our friends," he said. "But we let them take our lives. Oh, we might have all the riches in the world, thanks to the Colliers' bequest, but what good are they when we've kept ourselves from doing one of the things we truly loved?" He added a weak smile. "We're hoping all of you can help us regain some dignity now. We'll try our best not to overburden you, and we will make it worth your time."

Viola tugged at his hand. "Let's leave that discussion until dinner, dear. I'd like to spend the afternoon resting. You know I don't like my routine altered."

"Of course." He stood and helped her to her feet, not an easy task with a stone chair. "Ladies and gentlemen, please continue to enjoy the amenities. You'll find spiral staircases hidden within the six taller trees. Those will take you to the landing above. We'll see you promptly at seven for dinner. Mannie and Rosa will make sure you know the way."

The men stood up when Viola did, then slid down into their seats as the couple walked away.

"What was that all about?" Mike asked once they'd gone.

Sebastian briefly explained what they'd learned, leaving out their own speculations.

Michelle stared at the tree where the Prentices had disappeared. "I feel bad for them. Like I'd be the biggest jerk in the world if I refused their request to go on this expedition."

"Perhaps that's the point." Wyatt shoved to his feet. "I think I'll explore the garden."

"Would you like company?" If Trina had been a cat, that would have been a purr. She smiled at him, giving Wyatt every reason to say yes.

"No...thank you. I have a headache and need time alone." And with that, long strides carried him toward the tree-shrouded stairwell nearest his room.

Jeremy fell off his chair, laughing at Trina's crestfallen expression.

She nudged her toe into his hip. "Shut up and get in the hot tub."

Trina stepped over him. Jeremy scrambled to his feet to follow. They hit the water at the same time.

"Lots of room," Jeremy said. "And it feels great."

"Sorry...no swimsuit." Sebastian waved a hand, indicating his clothes.

"Me either." Jeremy's suit landed in a wet puddle ten feet from them. Water arced their way, splattering the table.

"Come on. It'll be like back when you were in college," Jeremy said. "You remember...like in the old days."

"Which was last week for you." Mike blotted his napkin over the droplets that had invaded his space.

"Spoilsport." Trina's bikini top plopped on the chair she'd vacated.

"Hey, quit!" Mike snapped. "You're getting us wet!"

"Afraid you'll melt?" She laughed. "I'll show you mine if you show me --"

Trina's wild-eyed gaze darted over Mike's shoulder. Her scream echoed through the enclosure, rolling back to them twice as she jumped from the hot tub and sped for the nearest exit she could find. Jeremy leaped after her, erection bobbing all the way. At least Lauren had a good idea what Trina saw in the guy.

He grabbed her upper arm and yanked her to a stop. Considering the force he used, Trina would have bruises there by the end of the day. This was a side of Jeremy they'd never seen. Lauren didn't like it.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" he yelled.

Trina flung a shaking finger toward the stairwell trees behind them. "I saw something. Something big with yellow eyes. I'd swear it was a panther."

"I'd be seeing things, too, if I'd sucked down ten mimosas. Upstairs." He swatted her backside and propelled her toward the exit.

"Well, well." Mike added a cluck of his tongue. "Who knew? A Jeremy with balls."

"Among other things," Michelle said with a snicker.

Lauren monitored the couple's progress across the landing and on to their room. Jeremy was on Trina's heels, jaw clenched under whatever words he threw at her. Trina wrapped her arms around her chest, trying to hide her naked breasts.

"Do you think he's going to hurt her?"

The other three glanced up in time to see Trina yank Jeremy over the threshold of their room.

"Never mind." She snorted. Trina was more likely to chew him up and spit him out. Jeremy could wind up regretting his show of bravado. "Obviously I'm seeing things, too." And feeling them, and hearing them.

Lauren dared a careful glance around the atrium. The sky overhead was at dusk. It was growing darker by the second. Yellow lights glowed, hidden within the foliage. Lauren wondered if that was what Trina had seen. She searched for shapes in the shadows. Anything to convince her mind Trina was mistaken...or not.

"Now that the piranha is gone... Anyone up for the hot tub?" Mike asked.

It was as good an excuse as any to put a few minutes' distance between herself and this place. If they dawdled, the system might cycle back to day by the time they returned.

"Sounds good." Lauren flashed a smile she didn't feel. "We'll change and be right back down."

"Take your time." Mike shot to his feet and strode toward the food table. "I've got to have one of those nectarines." He grabbed the first one he could reach, then jerked his hand back. "Hey, there's only butter knives."

"You big baby," Michelle scolded. "Just bite into it."

"I'll get juice all over me." He acted like she was asking him to eat mud.

Michelle stretched her arms high over her head. "I'll lick it off."

Heat lanced through Lauren as a foggy image replaced Mike's smart-ass reply -- a woman licking her tongue up a man's spine. She shook her head to clear it away, and laughter filtered in.

"I have a knife." Sebastian fished the Leatherman from his pocket.

Mike trotted toward the table and slid back into his chair. "Wow, that's a beauty. I love the engraving. Hey, it's got your name, too." Fruit forgotten, he pulled open each tool.

"Our moms sent us each one." Sebastian leaned his forearms on the table. The two looked like boys huddled over a found treasure.

"Mine's up in the room." Lauren jerked her thumb in that direction.

Sebastian pointed to a hinged tool. "Check this one out."

Michelle rolled her eyes heavenward. "God, we could be here for hours."

Lauren couldn't stand another second. Eyes were watching her, stripping her clothes away, trying to bore into her mind. It was stronger now than before, urging her to take Sebastian away now, to strip his clothes, draw his cock between her lips. A shiver crawled over her shoulders and down her back, followed quickly by a hot flash that had her sweating.

She shoved to shaky legs. "Then it's as good a time as any to change. I won't be long."

Lauren thought she heard Michelle follow her. She didn't look back to check for fear she'd see something lurking in the bushes. Something that watched her. Something that wanted her. Somehow she made it to their room without shouting for Sebastian, without grabbing him by the hand and dragging him with her. Quivering fingers had her blouse unbuttoned before she crossed the threshold.

Lauren peeled it off the instant the door closed, then jerked off her bra, desperately seeking a good, solid breath. Cool air peaked her nipples and raised goose bumps. Her skin glistened from a fine sheen of sweat, like she'd walked through a mist naked. Blood roared in her ears, drowning out sound and thought.

She shoved away from the door and peeled off her clothes, leaving a trail behind her as she hurried to the bathroom. In the recesses of her mind she heard the magnetic catch click when she yanked the shower door open. She twisted on both showerheads and stood in the center as they blasted on her. The cold water shocked her system back to normal. Heat dissipated, but a deep muscle ache replaced it.

Lauren soaped up the thick white washcloth and scrubbed it over her body. It scuffed over the bandage. Grabbing the end of the tape, she ripped it off. She tossed the gauze over the top of the stall, gasping at the pain that burned on her neck and down her shoulder. The bandage had snagged, and she prayed the wound hadn't reopened.

Wincing, she skidded her fingers to the wound. Something blunt and hard poked back. She pinched her flesh, grinding her teeth against the raw pain that tore through her when she squeezed. A sob came out anyway, and seconds later the door whipped open, and Sebastian was at her side.

"Good God, be still." One hand steadied her while he fumbled for the Leatherman reburied in his trouser pocket. "I hope I can get a solid grip with the pliers on this thing."

"Anything," she gasped out. "Cut it out if you have to."

Lauren braced her shaking hands against the tile, shivering now under the cold water. She felt something leave her body and heard Sebastian's gasp. She didn't want to see what he'd pulled from her, didn't want to know, and yet something compelled her to look. Another dart. A match to the two on their kitchen table.

"What the hell?" Her words, but he'd said them.

Her knees buckled, and she slid to the bottom of the shower. Sebastian twisted off the water and wrapped a towel around her as he helped her stand.

She clutched his shirt in her fists. "God, Sebastian, what's happening to me? What's in me? It feels like it's growing, spreading. And he's in my head. Make him stop." She broke down into sobs as he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the other room.

"Shh, sweetheart, I'll fix it. I swear I'll fix it."

He placed her on the marshmallow of a bed and tucked the covers around her, but when he tried to step away, she latched onto him. She couldn't be alone, not now, not when the ache consumed her.

"No! Stay! I need you to stay. I'm on fire. You...only you. Make it go away."

She caught him off balance and rocked back, taking him with her. Locking her leg behind his calf, she rolled on top of him. His erection pushed hard into her stomach. Lauren yanked up his shirt and raked her teeth over his belly. Her fingers moved with a will of their own, unzipping his trousers and shoving them and his boxers down his hips.

His cock sprang free, a drop of precum glistening at the tip. She flashed her tongue out to catch it. A gasp raised his hips, and she yanked the clothing further down.

"Mmmm..." She licked her lips, hungry for a taste of him. "I don't know whether to suck you dry or fuck you into oblivion."

Sebastian burrowed his fingers deep into her hair. He held her there, as if debating his choices. Lauren fluttered her tongue over her teeth and danced her fingers up his inner thighs. A shudder rippled through him. She knew him so well. Any second he'd shove his cock into her mouth and pump like a madman.

His grip tightened. "Who are you fucking, Lauren?" he demanded to know. "Who?"

The question caught her by surprise. She felt a snap in her head. A release. A wave of dizziness settled in her stomach.

"This isn't us, honey. He's in my head, too. It's not us."

"I...I think I'm gonna throw up..." She swung from the bed and raced into the bathroom. Sebastian pressed a cool cloth against her forehead as she lost her meal.

"That does it. I'm taking you to the emergency room."

"No." Somehow she managed to shake her head. "It'll screw everything up."

"Do you think I give a damn about that when you're --"

"When I'm what?" She ripped a wad of toilet paper off the roll and wiped her mouth. "Sick? Poisoned? Possessed? That one ought to go over well."

If she went in for the vomiting, they'd most likely send her home discounting it as a stomach virus. Possibly not even that, since she hadn't been constantly sick. And to tell them she'd been poisoned by a dart? Judging by the scowl on Sebastian's face, he didn't have an explanation either.

Lauren leaned against him and sighed. "I'll make you a deal. If I pass out, then you can take me to the hospital."

"If you pass out, you won't have a choice." He brushed a kiss to her temple. "I don't know what the hell's going on, sweetheart, but I swear I'll find a way to fix it."

## Chapter Nine

That was one hard-on Sebastian wouldn't have to worry about for a while. Pushing Lauren away ranked as one of the hardest things he'd ever done. He could feel the fire she talked about -- in her body and in his own. But he also felt the intruder, that more than annoying third party who somehow kept insinuating himself into their heads.

Wyatt's voice buzzed through Sebastian's brain, telling him to take her hard and take her now. He'd called her one endearment after the other and tried to force whatever Sebastian was away. It was crazy, all of it, but he knew then she wasn't Lauren anymore, knew he was close to not being Sebastian either. He saw the change in her eyes, the light brown turning to a chocolate so deep they were nearly black.

He fought back. His arms and will quaked with the effort to not shove his aching cock into her sweet mouth. The words cut through both of them, shattering the illusion they'd become. His erection subsided with awareness, and the next thing he knew he was holding Lauren's head while she threw up.

Confusion and anger squeezed in with his gut-wrenching worry for her. She slept now, bundled under the covers. The space between her eyebrows furrowed as her mind was attacked in dreams. He couldn't protect her there. Hell, he couldn't protect her now. How could he when he didn't know what the hell was going on?

Sebastian eased from the bed and walked back to the bathroom to clean up. His Leatherman lay in a puddle of water, the dart he'd removed clenched in the pliers' grip. He picked up the multitool and studied the sliver of wood up close. It was identical to the ones he'd found previously, but how had she been stuck again without them realizing it? The odds of someone getting it in the exact spot were astronomical. The most likely explanation was that he hadn't gotten it all last night. This part had been deeper and somehow managed to work itself out more today.

Taking care not to get pricked, Sebastian wrapped the dart in several layers of toilet paper. No telling what kind of drug was on the thing, but he sure as hell wasn't touching it. He had enough problems keeping his thoughts his own while he helped Lauren. He didn't need more. That left him wondering how he'd succumbed in the first place, and on more than one occasion. Maybe the dart in his tux *had* managed to poke him.

Sebastian pulled off his shirt and tried to see his back and shoulders in the full-length mirror. Nothing, not so much as a scratch. But a needle prick wouldn't show. There was one thing that was constant in this whole mess, though -- Wyatt. And that was going to end now. Sebastian didn't know how the man managed to get into both their heads, and he wasn't sure he cared. He just wanted it stopped.

He slung the damp towels over the shower door and yanked his shirt over his head. Wyatt had been headed to the garden. That was the perfect place to confront him.

After checking to make sure Lauren still rested, he slipped from the room. There was no lock to ensure her safety. Odd he hadn't noticed that before. He could put her Leatherman within her grasp for protection, but he'd have to wake her and let her know he'd done so. Sebastian didn't want to do that. After what she'd just gone through, she needed some rest.

He also thought of asking Michelle to sit with her while he searched for Wyatt. An orgasmic groan from the vicinity of the hot tub below told him that wouldn't be possible.

A peek over the rail confirmed his suspicions. Mike and Michelle were going at it big time. Each thrash sent waves pouring over the surrounding area, soaking the clothes they'd strewn everywhere. He'd have to find an alternate route to the garden. Although as engrossed as they were, he doubted they'd hear him slip through the waterfall tunnel to leave. Dual moans propelled him in the opposite direction to the main staircase.

Sebastian expected a challenge of some kind from Mannie and Rosa, or even the Prentices. But he didn't see or hear a soul. The garden was visible through the living room windows. Set at a right angle to the house, it took up at least an acre on the north side.

Finding an entrance to it wound up being fairly easy. A corridor just beyond the living room wall led to French doors and was a quicker route than if he'd gone through the atrium.

He pulled in his temper as he wrapped his hand around the handle. Though tempting to see the other man's too-straight nose broken, getting into a fight with Wyatt would solve nothing. He wanted answers, and he wanted them now. There were no logical explanations for what had happened. Wyatt could very well laugh at him and tell Sebastian he was crazy.

Maybe he was. Maybe the stress and worry of losing control of the dig site had pushed him and Lauren over the edge. He might buy that assumption if it weren't for those damned darts. Wyatt could argue that their thinking he was in their heads was delusion, but he couldn't argue that someone was trying to hurt them. And if that someone was Wyatt...

He pulled in a hard breath and opened the door. Gray stone steps led down into the sunken garden. Flagstone paths led in three different directions -- forward, left, and right.

They were wide enough for two people to walk side-by-side and damp from the rainstorm that had passed. Ferns hugged the walkway, growing larger and more diverse the further away from the house they grew. Lady Banks overheard provided thick shade and some protection from the elements, but the dense leaves and limbs couldn't keep out the rain. Even now random drips splattered onto the path. Anyone caught in the garden would have been drenched. He doubted he'd find Wyatt here.

He was about to step inside and look elsewhere when he recalled the gazebos. They'd be a good place to wait out a thunderstorm. Sebastian studied his options and decided on the forward path to the center.

The shrubbery absorbed the sound of his footsteps, and he marched on. Any birds that lived within the garden were either gone or hunkered down, awaiting the next squall. A flash of dark shadow to his right startled him. Sebastian's step faltered. He peered through the green, but the dark clouds coupled with the shaded garden played tricks on his vision.

He kept walking, trying to shake the eerie feeling he was being stalked. Heavy silence closed in on him. He was in an isolated place. No one knew he was here. If someone wanted to hurt him or Lauren, now was the perfect opportunity. She was unprotected, and he was exposed.

Sebastian did an about-face. Voices jerked him to a stop.

"Why are you making this so difficult?" He heard Liam ask.

"I don't want any mistakes. I will *not* have another pregnant one." Viola's voice was barely below a shout.

Sebastian edged closer and saw the white frame of the center gazebo ahead. Liam and Viola paced circles around each other.

"Why must it always be what you want?"

Viola shoved her face into his. "Because you've screwed things up so royally in the past. This last time was the perfect example. You weren't the one who carried that parasite within you. This body has been ruined all these years because of it. I won't go through that again. Trina Tate's breasts will weigh her down quickly. Do you really want to deal with *that*? And must I remind you what your lust for the perfect woman nearly cost us all those years ago? We've been running from that mistake too long."

Liam turned and squeezed his fists against his temples, like he fought the urge to hit her. "Do you think I like what's happened to this body? Do you think I like that I have a parasite of my own eating me inside out? Look how impressive Jeremy Gibson is."

"He's an imbecile. Do you really want to deal with that stigma? There's also a history of early heart disease in his family. Do you want it to give out? Where would that leave us?"

"Mike Sutton also has --"

"Why must it always be about that?" she shouted.



He whirled around so fast Viola actually took a step back. "Because size does matter, remember?"

"There's nothing wrong with Sebastian Garner," she stammered.

Liam tossed his hands up. "How can you tell? We can't seem to get the Garners' clothes off to take a look. How can we tell how fit they really are?"

"But I already prepared the other two. You said she was the one you wanted last night. The seed's been sown. Look...we agreed a long time ago it was more natural to keep a couple together."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Prep the blonde and we'll chose later. We can't afford another mistake like the last time. I want my options open in case something goes wrong."

Viola scuffed her hand over his back. "You saw for yourself that the others gravitate to them. They are born leaders. It's what we need. And the sensuality between the two might bleed over to us and help us recapture what we've lost along the way. Besides, things have already been set in motion."

"I've made my decision!"

She took a giant step back. "And you keep changing it every time I blink. If we did things your way, everyone on Earth would be selected."

"Mistakes have made me cautious."

"They've made you wishy-washy." She snapped back. "What about the paperwork?"

"That's what we have an attorney for."

"So...everyone goes. It truly will be a grand expedition." Sarcasm dripped from her voice. "I'll never be able to get as close to the others as I did to the Garners."

"Find a way."

"And what do we do about the excess baggage?"

"Dump it as we go. Just like always." He pivoted on his foot and trotted down the gazebo steps, leaving her fuming behind him.

Viola ran after him, grabbed his arm, and forced him to face her. "And what about Wyatt?"

He stared down his nose at her. "I know we didn't initially plan for him to join us, but he could be pivotal to our success, especially considering his friendship with the Garners...if we select them."

"And if we don't?"

"Then it hardly matters, now does it?" He jerked free and walked away.

Sebastian ducked low into the bushes to keep from being seen. He didn't know what to make of the puzzling conversation, but he sure as hell didn't want to be caught eavesdropping.

He crouched there for what felt like an eternity, waiting for Viola to move. All she did was glare after Liam's departing figure, now long gone. Finally, he had no choice but to try to pick his way through the brush and onto another path. His action seemed to propel her into motion. He listened to her sandals click along the path, coming closer to his location and then moving on. The sound of the French doors slamming indicated her departure.

Breathing a blessed sigh of relief, Sebastian continued to pick his way through the garden and to the adjoining path. That's when he ran into Wyatt; a very naked Wyatt. He looked like a startled cat squatting there with his clothes in a neat pile beside him. His hair was damp. Raindrops dotted a hard torso sprinkled with dark hair.

Sebastian jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "If you're waiting to rendezvous with Viola, she just left."

Wyatt sloughed off his surprise and straightened to put on his pants. "I wasn't. Things aren't what they might seem."

"Then explain what the hell you're doing here naked." Sebastian forced himself to not move any closer. If he did, he'd slug him.

Wyatt zipped up his pants and stuffed his bare feet into his shoes. "The same thing you're doing...listening."

Caught, and he couldn't deny it. "I'm dressed and was looking for you when I heard them."

"I was communing with nature, enjoying the rain on my skin, and trying to get rid of a pounding headache when *I* heard them." He jerked his shirt over his head and stabbed his arms through the sleeves. "Being naked as the day I was born, I couldn't jump out and tell them they weren't alone. What's your excuse?"

Sebastian opened his mouth and then clamped it shut. He had no excuse, so he got defensive. "That has got to be the biggest bullshit I've ever heard. Who the hell communes with nature in someone else's garden?"

"Probably the same type of person who'd sneak off to a museum garden and fuck his wife during an important fund-raiser."

Sebastian couldn't very well argue that point. "What do you expect me to think? What would you think if you'd found me here naked?"

"That Lauren wasn't far behind you. And that, my friend, *is* a reasonable assumption. Why in the hell would you think I'd be fucking Viola?"

"Have you seen the way you behave around her?" Sebastian arched an eyebrow, attempting to regain control and not feel so stupid.

Wyatt snorted. "I've been sucking up and kissing their asses for years trying to get to them. So far flirting with her is the only thing that's gotten me close, until your exhibit came along. All this time we've known each other, how in the world could you think I'd be interested in her physically?"

“Frankly, I don’t know what to think anymore.” His demand for Wyatt to stay out of their heads died on his lips. It sounded crazy, not to mention impossible. There was a simple, logical explanation for why Lauren’s eyes had darkened, and they’d both been hearing voices in their minds. The darts had contained some type of hallucinogen. Or it could have been in the food, since he hadn’t been darted. They’d all been drugged at breakfast.

That would explain a lot. Why Wyatt was nude in the garden. Why Mike and Michelle were fucking like dogs in heat in the hot tub. Why Jeremy and Trina had stripped to nothing in seconds -- although you never could tell about those two.

But it wouldn’t explain why, unless it was some sort of test the Prentices were doing to evaluate their fitness for this expedition. A person faced a lot of different things in the rain forest. Judging from their odd conversation, the Prentices had made mistakes before and couldn’t afford any again.

Maybe they hadn’t given up archaeology as they’d led everyone to believe and had been continuing to explore in areas where their presence wasn’t necessarily welcome. They’d want a team who could stand up to those rigors, people not vulnerable to biological or chemical attacks. He and Lauren had been at the top of the Prentices’ list...until she’d gotten sick. But if Wyatt had something to counteract that, not only could the Prentices’ see it work for Lauren now, but it would be a must-have for their expedition.

“I pulled another piece of wood out of Lauren’s neck a few minutes ago,” he finally said. “You said you had a salve.”

Wyatt’s nostrils flared. His mouth tightened. It took too many seconds before he finally replied, “I’ll get it and meet you in your room.”

Sebastian didn’t wait for anything more or to see if Wyatt followed his hasty departure. He’d been away from Lauren long enough as it was.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wyatt stared after Sebastian’s parting figure, seeing but not seeing him. Joaquin would be relieved to know he’d finally decided to keep his word and purge Lauren of the effects of the ceiba dart. Wyatt never intended to tell him how many times he’d faltered in coming to that choice.

Every whiff he got of Lauren was now irrevocably linked with his memory of Ka-ra. He’d lapsed again in the atrium, reaching deep in Lauren’s mind for the woman he loved. Too deep. Lauren realized the intrusion and fought him, making Wyatt ashamed of what he’d tried to take from his friends.

He’d come to the garden and shifted into jaguar form, letting the rain soak his fur and wash away his sin. But his thoughts had wandered back to the Garners of its own volition, probing for entrance, demanding Ka-ra seize control. Even she knew it was wrong, and her spirit fought against their need while her heart did as he commanded.

He turned his face to the sky, letting the drizzle soak him. "It's not supposed to be this hard," his voice choked out.

He thought of Ka-ra, of their love, of how fiery it'd been, of how his heart ached when he lost her. *His* beauty.

Whose love deserved to continue? His and Ka-ra's, or Sebastian and Lauren's?

Wyatt -- El-ian -- knew the choice he had to make. He wanted to damn himself for it, but he'd already been damned on a star-filled night centuries before.

## Chapter Ten

*The voices were back, whispering for Lauren to hurry. She ran toward the light, each step sucked down by soft sand. Water drifted by, dark blue, deep, cold. Faces of hundreds of women stared up from their depths. All pleaded with her to save herself before it was too late.*

*She called for Sebastian. His voice echoed back, but he was too far. She knew her only choice was to keep running and pray she was heading toward safety and not away from it.*

*Other voices reached her, angry and frantic. Their desperation leeches off the black rocks enclosing her. Her heartbeat pounded in her head, driving her to the brink of insanity. Lauren realized then it was a drumbeat measuring her last seconds.*

*She tripped and fell into the edge of the water, alerting them to her whereabouts. Icy tendrils licked at her naked body. Vines encased her wrists. She chewed at them as she crawled up the sandy bank. Pain lanced her neck. She gasped against it, trying not to scream. Teeth clenched, she edged toward the light, toward Sebastian. Another blocked her path.*

*Lauren stared up at his tall figure. She knew him well. Long fingers reached for her, wrapped over her shoulder, caressed her neck.*

*"Let me go. It's too late for us." It was her body, but not her mind or words any longer. She was someone else, and it was the Lauren-part of her that had to fight to the surface.*

*"After all this time, how can you deny our chance, Ka-ra?" He leaned close, lips parted to capture hers. Ka-ra's heart raced with anticipation and shoved Lauren's essence away.*

*She screamed, but there was no one to hear, no sound. Sebastian's voice grew faint, muted by Ka-ra's pulsing blood as she drew her lover closer.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Lauren jerked awake. A scream lodged in her throat when she saw Wyatt hovering behind her. Strong arms locked her in place. She struggled against them, fighting for freedom.

"Don't take me," she gasped out. "Let me stay."

"It's okay, honey. It's okay," Sebastian's soothing voice calmed her fear.

Her vision focused, dragging her out of the nightmare. She willed her racing heart to slow to normal and clutched at the lifeline Sebastian's biceps provided.

"Relax, sweetheart. Wyatt's putting an ointment on your neck to draw out anything else that might be lodged in there. I tried to do it alone, but you wouldn't let me."

Awareness crept in. He'd wrapped the bedsheet around her to cover her nudity. She was safe. It'd all been a horrible dream...except for the stinging in her neck.

"I'm sorry if it hurts." Wyatt smoothed the ointment on her neck with long strokes. "That's supposed to be a good sign."

"That's what my mom used to say about iodine," she managed to say.

Both men gave half-hearted chuckles.

"It's great stuff," he said. "I've used it before, and it works like magic. The sting goes away very quickly. And it doesn't smell."

Even as he said that the initial pain dissipated to a tickle. Lauren felt it seep into the wound. It wasn't cool or hot. She couldn't even say she felt it on her skin. On some level she imagined it going to the source of the problem and eliminating it. Her mind cleared all the more. The voices screeched to a blessed halt, and she was finally alone.

She pulled in a breath and straightened. Sebastian's hands on her waist ensured she stayed upright.

"It feels good. What's in it?" she asked, trying to look over her shoulder to see.

Wyatt held up a palm-sized jar. "Secret family recipe. I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention this to anyone else either. My grandmother would skin me alive if she knew I gave it up. It's great stuff. I never go anywhere without it."

He leaned back and screwed the lid on. "This'll wear off on its own. No need to worry. It's also transparent. No one will ever know you have it."

Sebastian cupped her chin and turned her head to the side to take a look. "It looks like it's already healing."

"Told you it's magic. I need to wash up." He disappeared into the adjoining bathroom. Lauren noticed he shoved the jar into his front pocket.

"How are you feeling?" Sebastian brushed his thumb along her jawline.

"Actually...I feel better than I have the last twenty-four hours." Her queasiness was gone along with her headache.

"Is this what you pulled out of her?" Wyatt parked himself in the bathroom doorway. The wood peeked up from between the folds of toilet paper.

"Yes, looks like a dart to me," Sebastian said.

Lauren shot him a sidelong glance. He obviously wasn't going to be intimidated into silence this time.

"It is," Wyatt said to her surprise. "Made from a ceiba tree. It's been worked and fired to make it harder. Otherwise the wood would be too soft to be effective. I've seen them before in my travels."

"Poisoned?" Lauren asked.

"Hard to tell without doing a test. Mind if I keep it to analyze?"

"Knock yourself out," Sebastian told him.

"Thanks. Do you still have the other two? I could have those tested as well."

He shook his head. "We flushed them down the toilet."

Lauren kept her gaze focused elsewhere so Wyatt couldn't see her surprise. If Sebastian had a reason for lying to him, she wasn't about to contradict him in front of the other man.

"Good." Wyatt shoved away. "Who's Leatherman?"

"Mine. Lauren has a similar one. Why?"

"I like the jaguar engraved on it. And the fact that it has your name." Wyatt walked out of the bathroom holding the multitool. He tossed it onto the bed beside Sebastian. "You might want to think about keeping it with you at all times. Even if you have to keep yours in your bra," he added to her with a smile.

"Why?" she asked.

"Call me superstitious and old fashioned, but as my grandmother would say, 'The jaguar will protect you.'"

She palmed the Leatherman. "Great, next time someone darts me I'll ask them to wait a minute while I pull out the knife...once I figure out which blade it is. If you're so superstitious, where's your jaguar talisman?"

"The jaguar marked me long ago." Wyatt peeled up the hem of his shirt. Three parallel scars were barely visible under the black hair that cut a rift down his hard stomach.

Lauren curled her fingers into her palms. The urge to trace the pattern was a little too overwhelming. Her nightmare pushed vividly front and center, but not the fear -- the longing of Ka-ra and...

*El-ian*, a voice called in her mind. Were they still in her head, or was this a memory resurfacing?

"I'm glad my ointment helped." He let the shirt fall back down and headed for the door. "I'll see you both later."

"I don't know how you're doing it, but stay the hell out of our heads." The words poured out before Lauren could stop them. She knew it sounded crazy, but couldn't help it.

Wyatt's back stiffened, fingers locked around the door knob. "The salve should help with that, too. The aftereffects will diminish soon."

He left without another word. Lauren didn't know what shocked her more -- that he didn't deny it, or that Sebastian didn't nail him to the wall.

"I think the Prentices might be using us for guinea pigs," he said before she could demand an explanation.

Talk about shock.

He patted the bed near the headboard, and she leaned against it, hugging her knees while he told her about the conversation he'd overheard and his new theories as a result.

She rested her cheek on her knees and let relief wash over her. She wasn't losing her mind. The tiny remnant of a voice that whispered inside her was only the residual effect of the hallucinogen.

"It's still crazy, but it's the first thing that does make sense. This must be one hell of a quest if they're willing to go to these lengths to test our physical abilities. I resent being used this way...I think. Although in a rather perverse sense I suppose I understand it, too."

"We should tell the others," Sebastian said.

She pulled her head up on a frown. "Would they listen? Would you if they told us? Wouldn't they think we're trying to keep them from going and hog all the," -- she made quote marks in the air -- "glory?"

"I suppose so." He stared at the far wall, huffed a humorless laugh, then turned a soft smile her way. "So...how do you really feel? You've got some color in your cheeks instead of that gray-white look. And your eyes aren't...your eyes are back to normal."

"As opposed to...?"

He draped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her down with him. "I thought they'd changed color. I realize now the pupils were dilated from whatever substance you were dealing with. But you didn't answer my question."

Lauren couldn't answer it for herself and make sense. So she didn't try. "Like I've crawled through miles of wet sand and desperately need a shower."

She tugged the sheet off and pressed her naked body against him. "Like I need you more than life itself. Logically, I know the nightmares I had weren't real, but inside they feel real. The emotion, the fear is still there. In them I couldn't get to you. I was afraid you were lost to me forever, or I was lost to you, or something like that. All I want right now is for you to hold me and love me and remind me that it was only a nightmare, and you've never been farther than an arm's length away."

His hand spanned her ass, anchoring her to him as his mouth touched hers. She closed her eyes on a sigh and parted her lips. It was one of those slow kisses that always devastated



her senses and made her blind to everything around her. He took her top lip between his in a gentle suck, released it, and did the same with the bottom. Then he traced the bow of her mouth slowly with his tongue and dotted kisses on each corner.

His cock was hard and, even with his trousers between them, pressed deep into her stomach. Lauren could have shoved the zipper down and had her fingers around it in less time than it took to think about it. But this was Sebastian's time. She'd said she needed him, and he was going to give himself to her. All she had to do was take.

He kneaded her butt cheeks and ground his pelvis against her as he started his kiss from the top lip again. It was more demanding this time, little nips to warn her that his tongue would soon mate with hers. Lauren wrapped her arm around his torso, fingers flexing into the muscles carved in his back.

Sebastian drew in a hard breath through his nose and pulled her bottom lip between his teeth. He traced his tongue over it, then covered her mouth in a little suck, a probe, another suck that molded them together, and then his tongue slid around hers.

He kissed her like it was their first time, not their millionth. He kissed her like he wanted to ensure she'd never tell him no, as if that were even possible. He kissed her until her body buzzed for want of him. Until Lauren thought she'd die if he didn't suck her tits soon. Until her pussy juices seeped onto her thighs.

She wrapped her leg around his calf and tried to pull his thigh between hers. Sebastian slid his fingers down the crack of her ass and dipped them in the well of her pussy.

A groan pulled her head back and her lips away from his. He raked his mouth down the column of her neck, kneading hard until she arched against him on another groan. He nuzzled his way to the other side, lashed at her earlobe, and attacked her neck again as he rolled her onto her back.

Lauren splayed her legs wide. Begging him would do no good. He'd pleasure her in his own sweet time. Experience proved he'd pleasure her damn well, too. That didn't stop her from trying to snag his legs and pull him into place. A tweak of her nipple settled her down with a new promise.

She swooped her hands to his chest and flicked her thumbs over his nipples. They beaded under the caress. Her reward was his moan that reverberated through her. She wadded his shirt in her fists and dragged it up and off.

"I have to feel you," she gasped out. "Touch you."

He kissed her into silence and wrapped his hand around her breast. Thumb and forefinger rolled her nipple to a point. The sensation arrowed to her clit, hardening it as much as her nipple.

He straddled her body, pushing her legs together. Lauren's whimpered protest died as his mouth closed over her breast, then suckled deep. She bowed into him, offering the other

as well. He pinched her nipple, grunting when her hips jerked against his crotch. She did it again, rubbing high to reach his balls.

Sebastian scooted lower, sucking her other breast hard before zigzagging a path to her navel. He traced a circle around it, then screwed his tongue inside. One finger dipped into the cleft of her pussy and rubbed her clitoris.

She writhed beneath him, desperate to come. Two fingers spread her labia. She could feel her clit rising from its plump lips. His middle finger traced it to the peak. Her body tensed, grabbing for the orgasm hovering over the horizon. He plunged his finger inside her cunt, drawing out more moisture that he wiped around and around her pussy lips, mimicking his tongue twirling in her belly button.

Lauren held her breath. Each swipe brought her a little closer to climax. One hand gripped his shoulder while the other fisted the sheet. He kept her legs trapped, forcing her clit to rigid attention.

She felt Sebastian shift lower, his tongue feathering a path to the hard knot of flesh thrusting above her pussy lips. Then he suckled it ever so gently into his mouth. Climax rippled through her in a sweet wave that rolled over her from head to toe.

He kissed her belly and rubbed circles on her thighs as she floated back down to earth. Each swipe of his thumbs urged her thighs to part. Lauren didn't argue. Lazy fingers combed through his hair as he kissed and nipped her inner thighs.

"I love the smell of you."

He blew against her clit. It perked up for more. Long fingers tunneled deep inside. She clenched her muscles around them. He finger-fucked her slowly, rubbing her G-spot with every stroke. As he pulled free, he kissed her pussy as he had her mouth, leaving nothing untouched. He sucked and nibbled up one side, down the other, then retraced his path and wiggled his tongue inside.

Lauren clutched her pillow and lifted her hips higher. Sebastian cupped his hand beneath to cushion her. He licked through her valleys over and over, ignoring her clit until she thought she'd go mad from the wait. Then he stopped.

She glanced down to find him watching her. He breathed in deep, like her scent truly was heaven to him, and draped her legs over his shoulders.

"You can have me close to coming with just a look. You know that, don't you?" she asked.

Sebastian smiled. "I know the feeling well, sweetheart." Still watching her, he flashed his tongue over her clit.

She cried and lifted her hips for more. He rolled the swollen flesh between his teeth, then suckled hard. Lauren shamelessly rode his face. Teeth clenched, she fought the cries that bubbled to her throat. Toes curled. Heels dug into his back.

No sweet waves this time. No cresting. He yanked her orgasm to the surface and sucked it out. Lauren's body turned inside out as she exploded. Sebastian didn't let go. Her clit remained clamped between his lips, at the mercy of his thrashing tongue.

"Oh, please. Oh, please. Too tender," she said through pants of breath.

Sebastian peeled his mouth away, kissing each of her thighs as he lowered her legs to the bed.

She watched him through heavy-lidded eyes as he stood and stripped the rest of his clothing away. A small wet spot marked his pants where precum had leaked through.

"How flexible are you feeling today?"

Lauren's gaze was riveted to his cock and the way it sprung free. "Huh?"

He scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bathroom, setting her down before the bidet.

He sat astride it facing the wall and grabbed the base of his cock. One stroke brought more precum oozing to the slit on top. "Hop on," he said with a smirk and twisted on the water.

Lauren watched it arc his way, sliding down the under-ridge of his penis and to his heavy sac beneath. Mirroring his position, she faced the wall and eased into place. Sebastian used one hand to guide his dick, the other to guide her hips. She splayed her hands against the tile wall and slowly seated herself onto him.

Warm water squirted over her clit. Lauren melted into a sigh and wiggled for more.

"God, you're tight!"

His breath was hot against her skin. Shivers wiggled up her spine. He wrapped one arm around her waist and braced the other next to her hand on the wall.

"Not a lot of pumping room." She nuzzled her face against his cheek.

"The way your cunt muscles are rippling over me right now, I don't need it." Then he made a liar of himself by pushing a stroke deeper into her.

Lauren gasped and pivoted on him.

"That's it. Do it, baby. Fuck me. Make yourself come again."

Fuck him? She could barely think beyond the steel rod spreading her wide. Every throb of his pulse swelled him more, made him harder and hotter. He thrust again, then again, one steady stroke for every second that ticked by. Lauren rolled into it, lifting her clit for the water, rearing her hips for his cock.

Pressure built, and he felt impossibly bigger. He was fucking her harder now, faster, fingers molded to her ribs as he held on. He fumbled for the controls. A second nozzle of water jetted out, and both streams increased in intensity.

He smacked his hand back against the wall and beat his cock into her. Lauren laced her fingers over his and let the rise take her. He stabbed deep and froze, locked in a fight to hold

on for her. She tossed her head back, too lost to tell him not to wait. Her body had a will of its own, intent on coming and not caring whether he was premature or not.

Sebastian groaned through clenched teeth. She felt the effort in the quake of his body. His control...for her...all for her...

"Now!" she cried as orgasm shot through her.

He let loose on a growl that doubled the intensity of her climax. Hot spurts of jism exploded inside her, mingling with her own juices, and dripped into the bidet beneath them.

Hard pants for breath sagged them together. Only their hands against the wall kept them from falling. She managed to twist off the water, then dropped her hand to his knee.

"I could really use a good nap right now," she said with a laugh.

"My thought exactly." He dropped kisses to her shoulder and helped her ease away.

They patted each other dry amid more after-love kisses. Then he scooped her into his arms once more and carried her back to bed.

He snapped the covers over them and spooned his body around hers. Lauren cuddled into his arms and closed her eyes. She was satiated and content.

*Ka-ra isn't.*

The thought snapped her from the edge of sleep, waking Sebastian, too.

"What's wrong?" he asked, pushing to his elbow.

Lauren rolled over and gently pressed him back down. "It's nothing. Whatever was on that dart is still screwing with my mind." She snuggled into him, resting her head on his chest. "I hate that they fucked with us."

"Yeah. Me, too." He combed his fingers through her hair and stared at the ceiling. "Maybe we should go. Say 'no, thank you' and walk out the door."

"You know we'd never forgive ourselves if the dig was lost because of us. Braden Institute might not take too kindly to it, either."

"True." She felt him shrug.

"Besides..." Lauren's fingers wandered along the planes of his chest. "After all this, aren't you just the teeniest, tiniest bit curious to know what's so fantastic that they would go to these bizarre lengths?"

"Beyond curious. But not at the risk of harm to you."

"That reminds me..." She propped her chin on his shoulder to look at him. "You lied to Wyatt about the other two darts. That would indicate to me you don't trust him."

"Not entirely."

"And yet you allowed him to put an unknown substance on my open wound."

Sebastian stretched back a little and looked down at her. "Oh, I wanted proof first."

"What did you do? Cut yourself and try it out?"

“Hell, no. What good would it have done if something happened to me, too? I couldn’t very well help you if I was incapacitated. I made Wyatt cut himself and use the stuff. It worked like a charm, so...”

Lauren rolled back on a hard laugh. “Oh, my God! My hero!”

He smirked and pulled her back into his arms. “You bet. I’d do anything to keep you safe, to make you happy. You know that, right?”

She traced the laugh line that bracketed his mouth. “I never doubted it for a second.” It was her recent nightmares that had forgotten.

He spooned against her once more. “Let’s squeeze in that nap before we go back into the lair.”

Lauren wrapped her arm around his. Suddenly sleep didn’t seem so appealing. Nightmares came with sleep, and until she was one hundred percent certain the hallucinogen was out of her system, she wasn’t closing her eyes.

## Chapter Eleven

Dinner was another informal setting. The Prentices had arranged for them to eat in the study. The color scheme was the same as elsewhere throughout the house, but at least this room looked lived in. Magazines and books, photos, and mementos lay strewn around.

Two low, narrow tables were set with crystal and silver before a semi-circular sectional sofa. Cushions on the floor would be their chairs. Their food was already in place, each plate covered with a silver dome to keep the food warm. Pitchers of iced tea and water sat at every other seat.

Lauren wondered if the others were as on edge as she and Sebastian. No one had said much about the upcoming revelations as they gathered at the bottom of the staircase for Rosa to escort them. They talked about their work as they would any other time. Since tonight was about that work, all of them -- with the exception of Jeremy -- locked themselves into professional mode. It was as natural to them as breathing. Surely the Prentices could respect and appreciate that.

"Everyone looks refreshed and well rested." Liam waved them toward the tables.

Viola was already seated at one end, hands folded under her chin, elbows propped on the table as she eyed each of them with a catlike smile.

"I know you're as anxious as we are," Liam said. "Please sit, and we'll talk while we eat. You'll notice there's no alcohol. I'd prefer to keep it that way from this point on. Clearer heads and all."

No one argued that point. One by one they eased to the floor. Liam took his seat at the other end. Once his ass hit the cushion, Mannie and Rosa swooped in to remove the covers from the plates. The meal was simple: baked chicken breast, fresh asparagus, and small red potatoes with dill butter seasoning.

"That will be all." Viola waved them away. "We don't wish to be disturbed. I'm sure between nine of us we can figure out how to load the dishwasher. Enjoy your day off tomorrow."

They thanked her with low bows and left, shutting the door behind them. With its click, Liam retrieved a remote control from under the table. A push of a button dimmed the overhead lights and raised the ambient light. A projector screen slid down from its niche in the ceiling.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm about to make you an offer I know you'll be unable to refuse." Liam's grin spotlighted them one at a time. "You've all been selected for your youth, stamina, and outstanding work in your field. This is the type of dedication Viola and I were looking for to help us in this final trip. We have devoted our lives to this particular research and have finally found the key. Because of its uniqueness, you'll understand why it was imperative we keep this quiet all these years. We wanted no one taking advantage of the knowledge we gleaned and making the discovery before us."

"And yet you're trusting us now," Mike said. "What's to keep us from taking the information and going alone?"

"Two things, Mr. Sutton," Liam replied. "I have the only existing map. And once you hear my offer, the choice will be simple."

"So which comes first? The chicken or the egg?" Sebastian asked.

Liam chuckled. "I've been asking myself that same question. Since Mr. Gibson will most likely want to know what's in it for him, let's start there. Here's what I will give to each of you in exchange for your completion of this expedition."

Lauren leaned forward. "Define completion. Is it contingent on success, or merely going along, being a team player, and coming back?"

"Liam and I will ensure the success." Viola sipped her tea. Moisture trickled off the glass and splotched her coral silk shirt. "So it will be the latter. Anyone who becomes a burden will be dismissed on the spot without reward."

Michelle lifted an asparagus spear and studied it. It was a poor ploy for not looking at anyone. "We'll have to take time off from our current projects though, won't we?"

"Yes," the Prentices replied in unison.

"But let's face it," Liam added, "you and Mike are tired of working Bonampak. You'd love the chance for your own discovery. You do very well, but unique opportunities are just beyond your reach. Someone always gets there before you. Case in point: the Garners' dig should have been yours."

Mike's fork clattered to his plate. "We don't resent Sebastian and Lauren's success."

"No, but you resent what kept you from accepting the job, from even being offered it," Viola told them. "Oh, you do your duty, but you don't like it. You have nothing because of it. It's even affected your marriage."

Lauren wanted to look at Sebastian, but she didn't dare. All of this was news to her. Mike and Michelle had seemed happy, devoted to each other, content in their work. Of course, she and Sebastian hadn't spent a lot of time in their company the last two years. Any contact was a quick hi and bye.

"We'll see your mother is properly cared for," Liam said. "Forever. No more drain on your finances. No more rushing off to handle her affairs and trying to keep your sister from pulling the plug. No more battles. We'll see the lawsuit against her and your family for your mother's DUI is settled and pay that settlement as well as the lawyer fees."

Michelle shoved her plate away. It teetered on the edge of the table. She buried her face in her hands and choked back sobs. Mike's support was a little too slow in coming for Lauren's liking. Judging from the tick in Sebastian's jaw, it was a little too slow for him as well. Finally, Mike draped his arm around her. When Michelle tried to shove him away, his grip tightened, forcing her to stay.

Liam's gaze shifted to Jeremy. "For a person with Mensa-level intelligence, you've really squandered your abilities. You hate having to work up the ladder, so you choose to not work at all. You think the world owes you. Consequently, you have substantial credit card debt and student loans, not to mention that nasty little business with the IRS."

"And I suppose you'll take care of that?"

"Every dime. And now, of course, you feel that's your right."

Lauren glanced at Jeremy. His smirk confirmed Liam's statement.

"If it weren't for your association with Trina Tate, you wouldn't be here at all," Liam added.

Jeremy's mouth drooped. It was hard not to laugh.

"Miss Tate..."

Trina's chin lifted along with an eyebrow. She stared at Liam, daring him. "I have no skeletons, no debt, no sordid past."

"No, but you watched your mother work herself to death and are determined to see you don't fall into the same cycle she did. We'll see you'll never have those worries."

"One million dollars, tax free, interest bearing account, my name only," she countered.

"Done."

Trina blinked. Liam didn't.

Those deep blue eyes focused on Lauren and Sebastian. Their price was obvious. In fact, the Prentices had already paid a good portion of it. The words were no surprise.

"Your dig site will be permanently funded. An account set up as well through Braden Institute. It will be used for nothing but your site...or any future one you find."

"Starting immediately," Sebastian said. "There are people waiting to return to work. Consider it a nonrefundable retainer. That's really something everyone here deserves, too."



You can't expect them to drop everything and run off with the promise of something only when they get back."

Liam's eyes flickered, but Lauren couldn't tell if it was anger or amusement. "Excellent point. Consider it done."

"In writing. Arranged through Barry Page as the institute's representative. After all, the institute needs to be protected as well as the people it has hired."

Lauren willed herself to breath. Sebastian's tactic was slick, aggressive. Clearly the dominate male taking charge.

"Viola and I will want to leave immediately. Everything is staged and waiting."

Sebastian merely shrugged. "We know how seriously Barry takes his job as fund-raiser. One call from Wyatt will get him here in an hour with laptop and printer. Papers can be printed out, signed, and secured at the Braden Institute. Barry might have been counseled last night and subsequently excused for his aggressiveness, but I doubt Wyatt would have fired him. Barry is too great an asset."

Lauren thought it was quite an assumption for Sebastian to make, but he made valid points. Plus he'd also become closer to Wyatt these last months than she had and would have a better understanding of how his mind, his business acumen worked.

"True." Wyatt pulled his cell phone from his pants pocket. "He's always on call. Ready at a moment's notice."

She hid her smile and let her admiration for Sebastian glow inside.

Liam started to lean back, then realized there was no backrest and snapped forward before he could fall. His cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "You don't even know what you're playing for."

"You're clearly willing to offer us anything we want. We want a retainer. We want it in writing. We want Braden Institute protected, not to mention those people at our dig site. We want Barry to draw up appropriate papers --"

"And you speak for everyone here?"

Sebastian glanced down the line at the others, then back at Liam. "Apparently so. Do you hear them arguing? As I was saying... The execution of any agreement can be contingent on us going with you. If we decline, the deal is gone."

"And my secret is out." His gaze narrowed with his lips. There wasn't any mistaking his anger this time.

"Not if confidentiality agreements are included. Let's face it, Liam. You could ruin all of us long before we could hope to spread your secret."

Time was measured in the tap of Liam's finger against the table. It was the only sound in the room. Liam's gaze locked with Sebastian's. She dared a glance at her husband, then at the others. Everyone stared at the older man, silently giving their support to the person

who'd pushed himself to the forefront as spokesman. It said a lot about Sebastian. Lauren was damned proud.

Viola studied her husband over the rim of her iced tea glass. She looked like she was actually enjoying the negotiation and subsequent standoff.

"Agreed," Liam finally said. "Call Barry." He sliced a look to Wyatt. "And I suppose that gives you what you want from this."

"It does." Wyatt tilted a nod his way.

Liam's smile didn't reach his cold blue eyes. "Well played, gentlemen. Well played. I'm sure you'd all like to know what you've won."

"We would...after the papers are signed. After all, the point is to protect everyone's interests, yours included. It'll give us time to enjoy our dinner while we wait for Barry."

Sebastian lifted his fork. His hand was steady, a clear indication he was more than comfortable in his role as leader. In one fell swoop he'd scored them big rewards and legal measures to ensure they received them. He'd topped it off with a reminder to Liam of his own priorities, snatching control from the man before he could grab it back. And the capper that had her pussy screaming for him was his subtle decree that they may now eat. He could have ordered her to present herself for fucking and Lauren would have broken her neck to do his bidding.

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It was the quietest meal Sebastian had ever had in his life. No one said a word. Actually, no one had said a word after Mike told Michelle to quit her "damn crying and eat."

He'd heard about the car accident that put Michelle's mother in a coma a couple of years ago, but hadn't realized all the events that had cascaded for them afterward. They'd put on a good front. Now that it was gone, Sebastian felt sorry for them. It was going to take a hell of a lot to heal their relationship. Money alone wasn't going to do it.

He was glad for the silence. He needed a little quiet to center himself. Sebastian had one hell of a hard-on after all that thanks to his testosterone-laden maneuvering. The one thing he wanted to do most right now was take Lauren to the nearest niche and fuck her...and not for her pleasure. He needed the outlet, the extra show of dominance. Her thigh pressed against his didn't help his resolve to calm down, either.

*Just one minute. That's all it'll take. Hell, thirty seconds for wild monkey sex.*

Sebastian had gone into dinner alert and wary, but even he was surprised at the turn of events. It wasn't that he'd seen an opening and taken it. It was the way Liam's Midas touch alternately blessed and humiliated the others that pissed him off. None of them were perfect, he and Lauren included. And though he really couldn't fault Liam for taking advantage of that, he did fault the method in which he did so. There were nicer ways to go about things.

But if he'd learned anything in the last twenty-four hours, it was that the Prentices weren't exactly nice people.

He didn't know where the stuff about Barry had come from, but he blessed the impulse a thousand times over. It'd filtered to him from some corner of his mind, spilling from his lips before he could stop. As the words tumbled out, some part of him knew they were right; having Wyatt's confirmation still eased his mind.

The meal was over in twenty minutes. That left forty minutes before Barry arrived. As if by unspoken command, they started clearing the table. Neither Viola nor Liam said a word about it. They sat there content to be cared for and probably thought it their God-given right in light of their generous offers, or might have been so angry they felt doing the after dinner cleanup was a suitable punishment to put the upstarts in their place.

Sebastian didn't give a damn either way. It was a mindless task to fill the time until Barry arrived. The six of them worked as a team, falling back on when they'd worked together as newbies on their first dig years ago. Wyatt opted to wait outside for Barry.

"How long do you think we'll be gone on this expedition?" Jeremy asked.

Mike scraped Michelle's uneaten food into the garbage. "Since we don't know what it is, it would be impossible to judge. Could be a week, a month, the whole season."

"Or more than one season?" Jeremy hoisted himself up onto the counter to sit. "Or forever? Too bad our fearless leader couldn't have asked that."

Sebastian shoved the plates into the dishwasher rack. "All you had to do was speak up."

Jeremy stared at the toes of his worn Nikes and swung his legs. "They do owe me. I shouldn't have to work for it."

"Oh...my...God!" Trina set the water pitcher down so hard a crack split up the side. "You *are* the laziest son of a bitch in the world. You heard them. You wouldn't be here if it weren't for me." She smacked her fist against her chest.

"Yeah..." He jumped to his feet. "I heard that, too. It's a real kick in the crotch, isn't it?"

"All you have to do is leave." Lauren wiped the counter where he'd sat.

"That is one option." Hands shoved in the pockets of his baggy jeans, he wandered back toward the library without another word.

"He's going to bail out."

Sebastian didn't know why Trina sounded surprised. No matter what the payoff, if work was involved, Jeremy wasn't interested.

"We don't have a lot of time." Sebastian closed the dishwasher and hit the start button. "We need to make sure we've thought of everything before we go back in there. Specific timeline of the agreement, escrow accounts in our names with the final pay-off in each, payment terms that specify payment in lump sum rather than installments where appropriate..."

The discussion didn't exactly snowball, but there was a flurry of thoughts tossed out. It made Sebastian feel better that they were taking some responsibility, and he wasn't making decisions for them all. He didn't have a problem stepping up, but he sure as hell didn't want to be blamed if it all went to hell.

Mike checked the digital clock on the microwave. "Barry should be here any minute. Let's do this before I lose what little nerve I have left. God knows Prentice already scooped up my remaining self-respect." His chuckle fell short of its mark. "What he said was true. We did resent the opportunities you and Lauren had that we didn't. And there were times we resented you even while we knew you didn't deserve it. But seeing you today out by the pool and now?" He snorted. "At this point in life I don't have what it takes in me to be in charge of any dig. You're clearly the better leader, and I'm grateful you're here now."

The admission and praise humbled Sebastian. He truly didn't know how to respond. So he let his heart speak. "Thanks, Mike. That means a lot to me." They shook hands and clapped each other on the back.

The steady tap of footsteps pulled their attention to the kitchen door. Wyatt was headed their way. He stopped when he realized they'd seen him.

"Barry's here."

"On our way," Sebastian replied, and let the others file out before him.

Lauren rubbed her warm hand over his shoulders and stretched on tiptoes. "I have never wanted you more than I do right now."

He swung her into his arms and pulled her body flush with his. "Hold on to that thought for later. All I wanted to do afterward was drag you into the nearest corner and have quick monkey sex."

She wiggled her hard nipples into his chest. "Be still my heart. You were magnificent in there. You reeked of alpha male. I'll bet there wasn't a woman in the room who wasn't ready to toss her panties at your feet."

Sebastian winced. "Not a pretty picture." He shuddered. "At least I have an image to keep those hard-ons under control."

"Leathery legs? Or tits that will smother you?"

He was a breath away from telling her all the fun things a man could do with a big breasted woman. Fortunately, common sense and self-preservation kept his mouth shut.

"A combination of both." He patted her bottom. "Let's go. I really want to get this over with. And when it is..." He left the promise unspoken when Lauren's breath caught as she closed her eyes and pulled her bottom lip between her teeth.

Yeah...that's what he'd like -- her on her knees, mouth wrapped around his cock while he pumped into it.

The image raised another erection. This one wouldn't be appeased easily. Cupping her elbow, Sebastian steered her to the nearest private spot -- the walk-in pantry.

"I want your bottom naked the second I close that door," he said against her ear.

A muffled groan answered him. Lauren's fingers flew to the zipper at her hip. He swung open the door and pushed her inside as he sliced open his own zipper. Lauren flicked on the overhead light and yanked one leg from her pants and panties, then fell to all fours and spread her thighs to him.

"You need this. You deserve this. You don't know how badly I wanted to be on my knees before you while you were battling in there. I wanted to be your willing servant, there to please only you. Fuck me," she finished in a whisper.

"Oh, I'm going to, sweetheart. And I'm going to be selfish about it, too."

He was behind her in a heartbeat, fist guiding cock right where it craved to be. One stab seated him deep. Fingers grasped her hips in a death grip, anchoring her in place. And then he gave her what she'd begged for, what his body and soul demanded. He fucked her like it was his right as her mate, as a male, as if their lives depended on it. Each stroke made him harder and harder, drove him deeper. It was primitive...perfect. Her ass lifted to him in submission, shoulders down, cheek pressed to the cold floor. Bliss covered her face. It made him feel...supreme.

Head tossed back, teeth clenched against the urge to yell out, he pounded into her faster and faster, then thrust deep and shot his seed into her womb. When the spasms died, they both stood on shaky legs and redressed. No kisses. No caresses. This was fucking, and right now nothing was more satisfying. Still, he couldn't resist giving her a wink and a sharp smack to her ass as they stepped out.

Wyatt was waiting for them on the other side, no more than ten feet away. Sebastian silently dared him to say something. He passed a slow, sad gaze over them.

"I wasn't sure if you'd heard," he said softly. "Barry's here. Liam called his attorney, too. He just arrived."

"Good," Sebastian replied. That the Prentices were wise enough to see their own interests were protected added some validity to this supposed unique venture. "Did Jeremy stay?"

"He did." Wyatt nodded.

"Then let's get to it."

"Yes...let's."

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In the end negotiations remained a moot point. Liam agreed with everything they'd asked. Barry printed up the agreements using his laptop and printer. Liam's attorney set up the escrow accounts on-line. The estimated timeline for the expedition was one week. One week, and he was paying all this money? It'd have to be one hell of a find, or else Liam and Viola were beyond eccentric.

Everything was completed and signed in under an hour. Everyone on both sides claimed to have what they wanted -- even Wyatt, whose sole provision was that he be allowed to accompany them as an individual, not as a representative of Braden Institute.

Once Barry and the attorney had left, Liam revoked his edict of no alcohol and uncorked several bottles of Chardonnay. It gave them something to do while they waited for confirmation from both parties that they'd returned to their designated offices and the documents were locked in a safe. They stayed on hand waiting for word on who would opt to go with the Prentices, and who would not.

The telephone rings blasted through the silence in the room. Liam and Wyatt answered their phones simultaneously. Nods confirmed all was in place for the next step.

Liam tossed down the last of his wine like it was a shot of whiskey. "Finally."

A press of the remote dimmed the lights once more. They found their places on the half-circle sofa as the slide presentation began with a map of the Yucatán Peninsula.

"I'm sure you all recognize the Chicxulub Crater."

Liam drew a circle where the western corner of the peninsula met the Gulf of Mexico. The crater was from the impact of a meteorite sixty-five million years ago -- the one that killed off the dinosaurs. About two-thirds of the crater was in the water, the other third on land. Time had obscured it; technology revealed it.

"You also know that the impact of the meteorite created fractures in the land. Over time those filled with water that rose and fell through the ages and became the cenotes we are now familiar with." Liam clicked the remote. Hundreds of little red dots ringed the land portion of the crater, each one indicating a cenote.

"Access to some of these is through underwater passages in the Gulf of Mexico. Others appear when the earth over them erodes. Slowly the wonders of the cenotes are being revealed, and in them we see how important these waters and caverns were to the peoples they served. Waters of life. At Chichén Itzá, live victims were thrown into one as sacrifices to the gods and told they would not die. Perhaps they didn't."

Jeremy sighed. "Then how do you explain all the skeletons? Could we skip *Archaeology For Dummies* and move this along?"

Viola shoved to her feet and stared the man into the sofa crack with the loose change. "Mr. Gibson, please do not denigrate what we have spent a lifetime researching. You are not the only genius in this room."

He pressed his lips closed and tucked his arms over his chest. Viola eased back to her seat and nodded at Liam to continue.

"We began our private research into the cenotes with our mentors. The Colliers had amassed a wealth of information, and we were privileged to have been selected to share that knowledge with them. It was on one of these explorations that we were attacked. And I'll tell you now...we weren't attacked by guerrillas patrolling the area. With his dying breath,

Bud Collier asked us to continue to protect his discoveries until the world was ready to accept them.”

“Then who attacked you?” Lauren asked.

Next photo -- a modern day Maya, sort of. The head was sloped from having been pressed between boards as an infant. The slant from forehead to crown was perfect. It was a practice that died centuries before. But the picture was in color and showed no evidence of having been altered from black and white. It also wasn't a portrait shot. It was a distant one that had caught the naked man unaware. He clutched a spear in one hand. Long black hair dangled down his back from the ponytail gathered at the crown. His skin was nut brown and smooth. A leather strip around his waist held two bone knives. A quiver of arrows was slung over his shoulder, along with his bow.

“He's part of an ancient order of Maya. No name exists for his people. Those who speak of their existence -- and they are few -- do so in whispers.”

Sebastian thought Liam overplayed his narration by lowering his voice as well. It was beginning to feel too much like ghost stories told around the campfire. “I'm surmising this tribe attacked you. Why?”

“They'd been charged with protecting the waters of life, and we'd gotten too close.” He snapped his palm up. “Please...let me finish before you ask any more questions.”

Mike heaved a sigh for all of them.

Liam ignored him and scooted to the edge of his seat. “It was long rumored among the Maya that the meteorite which created the Chicxulub Crater carried certain properties. You can't dispute that because scientists have theorized life began on Earth from the seeds of comets. The Maya believed we came from the World Tree, the Maya Tree of Life. To this day they associate the ceiba with resurrection and eternal life. They believed the waters in the cenotes were the fount of fertility and life. The Colliers discovered this was true.”

Sebastian scrubbed his hand down his face and tried to be polite. “We're talking the Fountain of Youth.”

“No,” Liam firmly replied. “Think more along the lines of the Fountain of Immortality.” He jumped up, pointing the remote at the screen. “This man is over three hundred years old.”

He flipped through a number of photos, each older than the last. The oldest one was dated 1890. Sebastian agreed they all looked like the same man, but photos could be manipulated. This was hardly compelling evidence.

“Imagine it.” Liam's eyes widened with excitement. “No sickness. No death. Immortality.”

“And they've managed to keep this a handy dandy little secret for centuries.” Trina leveled an arched eyebrow his way.

Liam looked down his nose at her. "For *millennia* they've protected it from the world. They move the waters of life each time someone comes close to finding them."

Michelle snorted. "That's a hell of a lot of water."

He whipped his head her way. "There are a hell of a lot of cenotes, some of which have presumably dried up. After years of exhaustive research, the Colliers were this close" -- he measured a minute space between his thumb and forefinger -- "to finding it when we were attacked. Viola and I are here today because we merely touched a single drop of this life-preserving water."

And because they managed to hide while the rest of their team was butchered. It was getting harder and harder for Sebastian to bite his tongue. "So you and Viola took up the torch," he said. "As the Colliers did, you've been surreptitiously looking for where this tribe went with the waters of life."

"Yes!" He pumped his fists in the air. "And found it!"

"I don't get it." Lauren slipped one leg over the other and slowly swung it to and fro. "You've managed all this time, why do you want us along? It makes more sense that you'd want the glory of the discovery all to yourselves."

Viola clucked her tongue. "A discovery is nothing without other scientists to back you up. All of you are highly regarded. Your opinion means a lot. You can verify the existence of the tribe, the facts surrounding their lives, the location of the water, and the sampling we take. Your reputations won't be tarnished. We'll take the brunt of that. We simply want someone to help record it."

"It's one week out of your lives, and you're being well paid for it," Liam added. "We've taken care of everything else. All we need is you."

There was a catch. There had to be. This was all too bizarre. It gave new meaning to the term "eccentric millionaire."

"When do we leave?" Wyatt asked.

"At dawn."

He shoved to his feet and plucked his cell phone from his pocket. "I'm in."

It was insane, wasn't it? Sebastian just didn't trust it, and yet the others stared at him waiting to see what he would do, waiting to follow his lead. This was one decision they were going to have to make on their own. Hell, he didn't even know what to answer for himself and Lauren.

For all the money the Prentices were laying out, this could be professional suicide. Any unbiased verification they gave of the facts would be tainted by the money the Prentices paid them. And yet there were people waiting to return to work, people who depended on him for their paychecks, who were counting on his and Lauren's dig.

*God, I hate being cornered.*



Lauren tucked her swinging leg behind his calf, subtly linking them, giving him the strength he needed.

Mike cleared his throat. "Michelle and I are in."

Jeremy shrugged. "What the hell...it's a week. I think it's all bullshit, but I got no problem taking your money."

That was really going to be the bottom line for all of them. Sebastian watched Trina nod from the corner of his eye.

"I'm in," she said quietly. "I'll need to go home and get some things though."

"Everything is provided," Liam told her. "We've outfitted you all inside and out. Food, gear, and clothing in all the correct sizes, even feminine products should that become necessary."

They'd been researched carefully, their compliance assured by the Prentices' willingness to give them anything. But this time Liam had gone one step too far, and his presumptions pissed Sebastian off.

He stretched to his feet. Liam's gloating victory smile made Sebastian more determined to wipe it away. He locked a no-nonsense stare onto the older man.

"With all due respect, Liam, I am personally offended. None of us are children. We don't need someone to clothe us down to our underwear or intimate products. We are consummate professionals, fully prepared to undertake any trek into the rain forest. I can't speak for the others, but Lauren and I have our own gear, and we fully intend to use it. The success of your expedition depends on our being comfortable. We can't be comfortable if we don't have our own things."

Liam's nostrils flared with every breath he took into his lungs. His lips thinned to nothing. "I've shared world-altering information with all of you. I can't let you leave."

Sebastian's eyebrows shot up. "Can't? Are we talking unlawful imprisonment here? Because that's what keeping us here against our will would be. One call to Barry will have the police here in no time."

Liam's face turned a mottled shade of red. Splotches also covered his neck. "I have devoted my life to this discovery. I won't have it jeopardized."

"Isn't that why we all signed legally binding confidentiality agreements? If professional ethics isn't enough to buy our silence, the threat of financial ruin would be. We are presumably traveling into a deep tropical forest. At some point you're going to have to trust us. After all, you are asking us to trust you."

"I'm paying for you to trust me!" He stabbed his finger into the air.

"You're *paying* for our time, our professional unbiased evaluation of your discovery. Do you really want to have *that* jeopardized?"

Liam dropped his arm. His posture drooped with the defeat. It added twenty years to him. "You've made a valid point. I'm sure you'll all understand my paranoia. Coupled with

my desire to make you all comfortable, it appears I may have been over-zealous. Of course I have no intention of keeping anyone here or forcing my impulsive purchases upon you. I would expect you all to return here by five for our departure. Is *that* acceptable?"

"Yes. Lauren and I will be here. Call Barry and tell him we're all in," he told Wyatt, taking the order from Liam's mouth.

Angry at his authority being usurped, Liam pivoted and strode from the room.

Viola stood slowly. "Thank you all," she said softly. "He's a proud man and wanted to do this his way rather than play on your sympathies. He's been diagnosed with cancer. The waters of life are his only hope." She gave them a nod and followed her husband's exit.

The truth, or more bullshit to take them off guard? No one seemed inclined to discuss it, and that was fine with Sebastian.

In seconds it was a done deal. Wyatt snapped the phone closed and walked away without another word. Sebastian and Lauren found him a few minutes later when they returned to their room to get their suitcase. He stared at the Milky Way night view. By tomorrow this time they'd be looking at the real deal.

"You should leave now," he said.

"Will the institute fund the dig?" Sebastian asked.

Wyatt slowly shook his head. "No," his voice was barely audible.

"Then I guess we have to see it through and hope for the best."

"Yes, I guess we do." He turned and walked to his room.

Lauren tucked her arm around Sebastian's waist and led him to theirs. Two steps across the threshold, she shut the door and pressed him into it.

"God...I've been waiting all night to do this." Lightning-fast fingers unzipped his pants and bared him to his knees.

"Honey, we need to leave." Even as he said the words, his hands were furrowing into her hair as she knelt before him. He thrust his hard cock forward, seeking her mouth.

"I'll be quick," she whispered, and whipped her tongue over the head.

Sebastian's knees buckled with his soft groan. She cupped his balls, kneading gently while one finger probed his anus. She sucked him deep, feathering her tongue up, down, and around. Then she yanked back, eyes flashing lust at him.

Lauren latched onto him again. Sebastian couldn't think beyond the fire in his cock and balls. Hands locked on either side of her head, he thrust wildly into her hot, vacuum-tight mouth. Nimble fingers milked his testicles, demanding they give it up. Then she plunged her finger deep into his ass, hitting his prostrate.

Cum jetted from him with an intensity that shot sparks through his veins. He sagged into the door, barely conscious of Lauren taking in everything he gave her, of her licking gently while his randy penis grew flaccid, of the kisses she dotted on his groin.

"There," she said with a sigh, "now we can go home."

"And I can honestly say that I'll have no problem falling asleep now." He twirled her silky hair through his fingertips.

"Then my work here is done."

"Oh, I do hope not."

\* \* \* \* \*

Wyatt held the ceiba dart under the lamplight as he curled into his chair. The polished red-brown sliver glistened. Somehow in the twisted mystery of all this horror, Ka-ra's soul had been infused here. He held a part of her between his fingers. If he stabbed it in deep enough, would her soul pour into him?

"Well?"

He jumped at the sound of Joaquin's voice and palmed the dart. He'd been too deep in thought and misery to hear him arrive, much less enter, the condo.

"Tomorrow morning at five. We meet at the Prentices' and fly from there. Location still unknown."

Joaquin paced before him. Long, slow strides similar to those when he was on the hunt. "The location is unknown, but the pilot isn't. We'll leave him to Carmen to get that information."

That made him almost smile. Once Carmen turned on her charms, she could coax information out of the most stalwart...male or female.

"After tonight, there's no doubt the Garners will be the chosen ones," he said. "I think the others should be guarded just in case Prentice decides he'd rather not deal with them going along."

"You stretch our resources too thin sometimes, my friend." Joaquin sat on the edge of the long sofa set at a right angle to Wyatt's chair. "But I agree and have already set the watch." He tapped the back of Wyatt's hand. "What are you hiding from me?"

Wyatt should have known better. Joaquin was too observant.

He opened his palm slowly. "A piece of Ka-ra."

Joaquin's shoulders drooped with his weary sigh. "El-ian, my sister is gone, her soul imprisoned. Do you really want to continue to condemn her to that existence? Do you really think she wants that non-life?" He cupped his hand over Wyatt's knee. "Destroy it, brother."

He nodded slowly, but continued to stare at the dart.

Joaquin leaned away. "Were there others?"

"Two. Sebastian indicated he flushed them down the toilet, but..." He shrugged.

"I'll have Barry search their apartment once they leave. I've left GPS tracking dots by the door for you and anyone else you can manage to tag."

“Just remember...we make no move until we get them into the lair. I want this ended...forever.”

“Just *you* remember how slippery they can be. How desperate they are. I don’t want you caught in their trap. The last thing I want is to walk into that cenote and find you impaled on one of their ceiba stakes. Or, worse yet, that they had decided that your body would be the perfect host.”

“After their experience with Ka-ra, I doubt they’d find taking over one of our kind very appealing.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Joaquin shoved to his feet. “They’ve acquired centuries of experience since then. As you’ve said before...leave nothing to chance. I’ll see you down there.” He started for the door.

“I’m thinking of telling the Garners everything,” Wyatt said to his back.

Joaquin whipped around, eyes blazing yellow. “And risk they’ll not go at all? Don’t let false affection sway you, El-ian. You said so yourself. They are the chosen ones. If they don’t go, our chances of eliminating these skinwalkers plummet. Please, don’t falter now. Not when we are so close. Think of how long we’ve waited, how carefully we planned and baited them.”

Wyatt knew he was right. But the guilt remained. “I’ll see you down there tomorrow.”

Joaquin left, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Wyatt stared at the dart in his palm. His thoughts flashed from Ka-ra to Sebastian and Lauren and what they’d shared. He’d stood outside the pantry, knowing what they were doing inside, feeling lost and lonely because he couldn’t be a part of that unfettered passion.

He pushed to his feet and walked to his bedroom where he’d started to gather his things for tomorrow’s trip. Finding the dart in his small suitcase had sidetracked him.

The jar of ointment sat next to his backpack. He unscrewed the top with one hand. A single dollop would be all it took to dissolve the dart.

*Not now*, his heart begged. *Just a little while longer.*

Wyatt wrapped it in tissue once more and shoved the dart deep into his backpack. He couldn’t let her go. He simply couldn’t.

## Chapter Twelve

Lauren remembered the first time she'd seen the tropical rain forest ten years before. The dark green swatch of never-ending trees had taken her breath away. It still did, although she preferred the more pristine landscape near the Guatemalan border where their site was to that of the Yucatán Peninsula.

From the air the towering trees made it look like one flat expanse with large mounds pushing up every so often. Those treetops protected a vast ecosystem within its branches and on the forest floor below -- a world unto itself.

Each up-thrust mound indicated an ancient Maya city long-reclaimed by the forest. They awaited time, patience, manpower, and money to be rediscovered. Nothing was more glorious than being told, "Pick one and work it." That's exactly what she and Sebastian had done, praying every day they'd made the right choice, and it would be a spectacular find. No one knew then how much they fretted in private over the matter. And no one would know now how much they worried over this latest decision.

Neither of them had slept much the night before. They didn't talk about it either. It took them no time to prepare for the trip. Just about everything had been packed in anticipation of returning to their own dig site. A double check was all they'd needed.

The sanctuary of their small apartment had never felt sweeter after being in the rambling Prentice estate. But once in bed Sebastian stared at the ceiling. Lauren lay beside him and watched him. She knew the weight he carried. The others might have freely given their assent, but Sebastian was the one they followed. It was the role nature had given him, and he didn't take the responsibility lightly.

They crawled out of bed at four. Grabbing coffee and the last of the bagels, they dashed off e-mails to their family and slipped a note under their landlords' door that they'd be gone, and then returned to the Prentices'. Two Suburbans had sat in the driveway, motors running,

drivers waiting to take everyone to an airfield on the outskirts of San Diego. Liam's Gulfstream was poised there for takeoff. The major equipment they'd need was already on-site. So far they were heading out in high style. Lauren privately thought it was a horrible waste of money.

The change in altitude as they descended stirred Sebastian from some much needed sleep. He stretched and leaned over to glance out the small window. His fresh male scent coupled with his body warmth helped settle Lauren's nerves.

"We've passed Mérida," she said. They'd be landing at a secluded airstrip formerly used by drug runners, or so Viola had somewhat proudly informed.

"The city seems to spread forever outward now." He kissed her cheek.

Civilization encroached on the forest. Farmers cleared the land for crops. When the soil no longer produced, they cut the trees to graze cattle. "Makes you wonder how this mysterious tribe of ancient Maya can continue to hide."

"Yep."

He nodded toward the window, but Lauren had already seen the runway slashed in a clearing below. A narrow ribbon of brown road led away from it and disappeared under the canopy of trees. Their transportation this time? Two slate blue Hummers.

"You really believe in traveling in style, don't you?" Jeremy's voice seemed extra loud over the engine. As if he suddenly decided he needed attention after having been quiet for the last nine hours.

Liam cocked an eyebrow his way. "Viola and I like our comforts. We can afford them. Perhaps one day you will, too."

The last comment was directed Sebastian and Lauren's way. His tone of voice made her skin crawl. She glanced around to see if anyone had noticed. If they had, they made it a point not to make it obvious.

"How much further from here?" Mike asked.

Liam twisted around to reply, wincing as he did so. Yellow tinged his complexion. His hair had lost its luster as well. "Another hour driving until we reach the main encampment. We'll hike out to the cenote at first light and make a smaller camp there."

Trina leaned into the aisle from her seat behind them. "Won't all this activity spook the very people we're attempting to court?"

Liam struggled for an answer. Viola supplied it for him. "They know we're close. Chances are they'll try to remedy that as they did before."

"You mean kill us?" Michelle shrieked.

Viola gave a solemn nod. "This time we are well armed and well prepared. You knew the risks. We were quite clear on the danger we faced before."

Yes, they were, but Lauren doubted Michelle understood any of it as distraught as she'd been. A sharp intake of breath snapped Michelle around to Mike. He cut her off with a slice of his hand before she could say a word. Hands gripping the armrests, Michelle stared at the back of the seat in front of her. Tears trickled in silent tracks down her cheeks as the pilot brought the small jet into its final approach.

The landing wasn't the smoothest, but Lauren had been on rougher ones on 757s. This one was precise, putting them within five hundred yards of the Hummers. The instant the engines died, someone outside opened the baggage compartment. The co-pilot slung his seat belt aside and jumped up to open the door and put the steps down.

Lauren bent down to pull her small duffel bag from under the seat while Sebastian removed his from the overhead bin. He liked leg room during a flight; she liked something she could prop her feet on. Their exit was also a pleasant break from the normal cattle stampede of regular flights. As they shuffled toward the door -- and it was a shuffle for Liam -- Lauren noted everyone had opted for jeans, boots, and T-shirts with various slogans. Sebastian's would always be her favorite -- a black T-shirt with red letters that said, "I Dig You."

"You dropped this," Wyatt said as he tapped her shoulder. "I saw it in your seat."

Lauren glanced around and saw her Leatherman in his hands. It must have slipped out of her pocket. "Thanks."

Sebastian automatically felt for his and must have found it, since he said nothing. She started to stuff hers back into her jeans, then chose the most secure place she knew of -- her bra.

Wyatt questioned her action with a tilt of his head.

"Tight fit," she explained. "No chance of it falling out. Don't look so surprised. It was your idea in the first place when you told us to keep them on us at all times."

"So it was," he acquiesced the point with a slow nod. "It's nice to know someone listens to me, no matter how far-fetched. Grandmother would be proud to know her superstitions have been taken to heart...and made all of her progeny paranoid."

The way he looked at her dredged up the memories from her hallucinogen-induced nightmares, and the feelings that came with them.

Fingers clutched around the handle of her bag to keep them from shaking, Lauren faced front. The exit was steps away. God, she needed a breath of fresh air. Considering the humidity pouring into the cabin, she didn't think she'd get it. She blinked against the bright sunlight as she trotted down the steps behind Sebastian. Her sunglasses were buried in her bag. She left them there. They'd be under the forest canopy soon, and she wouldn't need them.

Sebastian had already snagged their backpacks by the time her foot touched the hard-parked dirt that served as a runway. She took hers from him, hoisted it to her shoulder, and

fell into step beside him. The doors to the Hummers stood open. One driver had kicked back in his seat, baseball cap covering his eyes while he caught a nap. The other lounged against the vehicle, puffing on a cigarette. Neither looked armed.

"I'm afraid it will be a little crowded. The Hummers only seat five." Liam huffed and puffed with every step. "Wyatt was a last minute addition. Transportation and accommodations are a bit of a problem."

And he didn't mention it until now?

"It's okay," Wyatt said. "I can sit in the cargo area. And in camp all I'll need is a place to lay my sleeping bag."

He cut ahead, tossed his backpack into the Hummer, and crawled up beside it.

The Prentices took the coveted front passenger seats in each vehicle. Lauren wasn't sure if that was for their comfort or another power play. Sebastian didn't hesitate to get into Liam's vehicle. To Lauren's surprise, Jeremy followed him. The three of them hoisted their bags into the cargo area with a crammed-in Wyatt, then slid into the back seat. The doors closed them in air conditioned comfort.

The ride was an uneventful trip down a tunnel of green cut into the forest. An hour later the underbrush cleared, and Lauren got her first view of the main camp.

There was nothing temporary about the place. Six tents -- two large, four smaller -- were atop wooden platforms one foot off the ground. The mess tent -- the largest of them -- had the sides rolled up. Screening allowed the breeze to flow through. A few men sat on the benches hugging tin cups and watching the new arrivals with cautious eyes. Guards walked the perimeter, crossbows at the ready.

"Crossbows?" Jeremy asked.

"We wouldn't want guns to fall into the hands of these people," Liam replied. "The smaller tents are for your use tonight."

In reality, they could hardly be considered small. They were tall enough to accommodate a six-footer, wide enough for eight people. Zippers kept doors and windows closed, both of which were screened like the mess tent. Field showers in individual wooden stalls were lined up on the one side of the clearing; porta-potties on the other. All in all it looked very much like the field sites Lauren and Sebastian were used to.

"The other large tent houses the men," Liam told them. "They are wary of strangers, but wouldn't begrudge you a place to bunk down. Tomorrow night will be more problematic. The tents we pack out are much smaller and won't support more than four in each."

"I'll worry about tomorrow when tomorrow comes," Wyatt replied.

"Good." One of the guards opened Liam's door as the Hummer came to a stop. "Viola and I will be resting in our tent until tomorrow. The kitchen is open all day with meals served at six, noon, and six. Select any tent you wish."



And like that the seven of them were left standing in the middle of camp. The loud putter of a gasoline-powered generator silenced any wildlife. A spiderweb of electric wiring swung from one shelter to the other. A portable air conditioner purred to life in the Prentice tent.

The Hispanic males poised around the camp paid them little attention. A few yawned and scratched their balls. Lauren doubted even Trina's cleavage could rouse them.

"None of them seem very alert for a possible attack," she said. "They look bored."

Then the cook lifted his hand in greeting. The other men did the same.

"Looks like that's our cue to make nice." Wyatt hoisted his pack to his shoulder, accidentally clipping Trina's arm in the process.

She yelped and jerked away. "What the hell?" A scratch scored her from wrist to elbow. Pin pricks of blood oozed up in spots.

"Oh, my God. I'm so sorry." Wyatt clasped her wrist in one hand and grappled for something from his front pocket with the other. "I think the zipper caught you. Let me help."

Trina pulled free. "It's okay. I've got it. Jeremy, be a dear and grab my stuff." Dabbing at the scratch with the bottom of her powder blue Tinkerbell T-shirt, she claimed the nearest tent as theirs.

Laden with two backpacks and two duffel bags, Jeremy dutifully trotted ahead and unzipped the tent. With his unfettered, "Wow," he dropped it all inside, then started tying the canvas flaps back in order to get air flowing through.

"Obviously we don't rate an air conditioner." Michelle grabbed her gear by the handles and stomped to the next tent. "You coming or what?" she snapped to Mike.

"Pull your panties out of your crack," he shot back. "I'll be there in a minute." He slung his packs over his shoulder. "'Til death do us part.' There are days... I swear to God, if she thinks she's going to divorce me after all the crap I've been through for her..." His laugh held no humor. "Anyone want to help me hide the body?"

Mike's face reddened as if he suddenly realized what he'd said. He didn't bother to wait for any reply or admonishment. Lauren's heart broke for them. They'd been crazy in love all those years ago. Until she'd heard the revelations last night, she'd thought they still were. It made her want to cling to Sebastian and never let go.

"Guess I'd better see how friendly the locals really are," Wyatt said, eyeing the men lounging in the mess tent.

"Not so fast." Sebastian grabbed his upper arm and held him in place, his face inches from the other man's.

Lauren's heartbeat doubled while her mind kept asking, "*What the hell...*"

"That wasn't your zipper that scratched Trina. I can see the dart poking through your backpack. What the fuck are you doing with it?"

Wyatt tried to jerk free, but Sebastian's hold was tight, no nonsense. She hadn't seen him this mad in ages.

"I forgot I had it. Okay? I took it to have it analyzed and must have shoved it in the backpack with all the stuff from my pockets in my rush to pack last night."

Sebastian gave his arm a shove as he released him. "Why have something that dangerous in your pocket to begin with?"

"Calm down. It was an oversight. I'll get rid of it the first chance I can do so without detection." He started to move away.

Sebastian blocked him once more. "And see to Trina before she starts showing any adverse effects from it. I presume you have your magic potion with you?" Sarcasm lifted his lip in a barely perceptible sneer. Lauren didn't blame him for being upset. She knew what the substance on that dart could do to a person.

"Never leave home without it. I'll take care of her. Discreetly, of course."

"Of course."

They stared at each other way too long for Lauren's comfort. Yet she did nothing to interfere with the silent battle they waged. By unspoken decree, they took a step away and broke eye contact. Wyatt walked on to the mess tent; Sebastian grabbed their gear and motioned Lauren to the remaining tent with a tilt of his chin.

He said nothing, and she didn't ask. Tension had surrounded their little group since they'd landed. It weighed them down along with the humidity. A little distance from each other would do them good, help them get through the days ahead.

The interior of their tent was extra-nice, but then she'd come to expect no less of the Prentices. Two double cots were in the center of the room. A framework of mosquito netting surrounded them, a mini-tent of its own. Three-inch thick foam cushions padded the cots. New pillows with the tags still on them marked the head. Olive-drab wool blankets were at the foot.

Sebastian dropped his gear in the far corner, then walked to a large Coleman chest cooler on the other side. Frost fogged the air when he lifted the lid.

"Beer and bottled water. Do I need to ask which you'd like?"

They weren't drinkers, but after the last forty-eight hours... "Nope." She peeled the netting aside and sank onto one of the cots.

Sebastian twisted the caps off two bottles of beer and joined her, stretching onto his cot with a weary sigh.

"What? No lime for my beer?" she joked as she wrapped her hand around the bottle.

"No bidet either. Man...I hate roughing it." He tipped down a long slug. "It's not chocolate milk, but it'll do."

Lauren snickered and did the same. The icy brew slid down her throat sweet and smooth. "Shower's going to feel good tonight. I'd bet there's even hot water." A rare to nonexistent treat at other camps. Field showers were quick and cold...or piss-warm at best.

"All the hot water and cold beer in the world won't wash away the stench from this trip." He stared into nothing. "I feel like I've whored myself."

She didn't know what to say in response -- *no, you didn't, I feel the same way, we're in this together*. Maybe silence was the best option. She glanced his way to see if he noticed. Sebastian was sound asleep, the empty bottle dangling from his fingertips.

*Now that looks like a good idea.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Lauren sat on the edge of their tent platform and watched the stars wink to life. An afternoon siesta had soothed everyone's nerves considerably. Their past camaraderie wasn't there, but at least the atmosphere wasn't thick with tension.

Dinner was a not-too-spicy *posole* with tortillas, washed down with a couple more beers. They'd mingled with the camp's men, none of whom spoke English. That was nothing new. All of them were bilingual -- a necessity in their line of work. The Prentices ate in the privacy of their tent, which was fine since everyone seemed less on edge without them around -- even the men they'd hired.

While the men bullshitted, the three women took showers. As Lauren guessed, they had hot water -- limited, of course, but very much appreciated. Afterward she sat outside and watched the sky while she waited for Sebastian to finish showering and join her. Citronella torches lighted the encampment and fought to keep mosquitoes at bay. A few bats flitting overheard also helped with insect control.

She smiled to herself when she saw the Milky Way come into view. *So much nicer than the fake version*. This was how it deserved to be viewed -- with the edges tipping the horizon, not confined to the second landing of an overblown house.

A twig snapped to her left, pulling Lauren's attention. She stared into the dark line of trees and saw golden eyes stare back...and start toward her. She scooted closer to the tent entrance, ready to make a stealthy retreat, when Wyatt stepped into the pool of dim torchlight.

"I didn't mean to startle you." He sat down beside her. "I was wandering around waiting for my turn in the shower and saw you stargazing, so I thought I'd join you."

"Of course." She hugged her knees to her chest and glanced at the sky. "I was thinking of how much more beautiful it is in person."

"Yes, I can't say I like the Prentices' homage to the cosmos. There's no life to it. This you can feel, you can smell, touch. Did you notice the change in energy when we entered

the crater? We've been inside it since we landed. I swear I can see it shimmering in the air. Feel it in my bones. It's like...home."

She'd sensed something, but it wasn't anything good. "Is it your home?"

He gave a small laugh. "Yes, I was born here. No matter how many years I'm away, it's still a part of me, part of my blood."

She watched him stare upward, his silhouette reflected in the light. He looked sad...lost...just as he had in her nightmare.

"*Ka-ra...*" Long fingers reached for the person she'd become in her dream.

Tears ran in torrents down Ka-ra's cheeks. "*El-ian...*"

"Wyatt? Who's Ka-ra?" The words came out of their own volition.

Wide, gold-brown eyes snapped her way. She jolted from the impact. Just as quickly the intensity in his gaze softened. "Why do you ask?"

"I had odd dreams when the hallucinogen was in my system. They were so vivid I guess I felt compelled to ask."

A sigh pulled his gaze skyward. "She was my beauty, my love." He pressed his hand over his stomach. "These scars came from her the first time I touched her. She didn't hesitate to remind me of my manners."

Lauren's eyebrows inched closer with her puzzlement. "Ka-ra was a jaguar?"

He looked at her once more, yet wasn't seeing her. His eyes held a faraway look. "The most beautiful one that has ever existed. Black, sleek, graceful with golden eyes that could light the darkest jungle night."

"I saw her as a woman."

"Do you remember?" he whispered. His hand lifted toward her cheek. "Are you in there?"

Lauren's heart beat wildly out of control. How could she be petrified and excited at the same time?

Wyatt abruptly dropped his arm, breaking whatever psychic hold he'd had on her. "Here comes Sebastian. Looks like it's my turn to hit the shower. Thanks for the company."

She muttered "good night," but he'd already gone. What peace she'd found under the stars dissipated. She pulled in a breath and watched Sebastian walking her way. His stride was loose, long, and confident. His worries of the day temporarily scattered. And just as she felt her own good feelings return, Viola darted from her tent.

Sebastian jerked to a stop, clearly surprised by her sudden appearance. Fifteen more feet and he would have been home clear.

"Something wrong, Viola?"

"No...nothing." She dusted her hand down his arm from shoulder to elbow. "Liam is resting, and we'll both be in top form tomorrow. We wanted to know if you were comfortable."

They started slowly walking Lauren's way.

"Yes, more than comfortable," he replied. Torchlight cast shadows in the furrows of his brow.

"Good." She laced her fingers before her and measured each step. "You could have all this, you know. Live with these pleasures, comforts, and luxuries. A twist of fate, luck of the draw...the stroke of a pen could make it happen."

"I'm content, Viola. Though all of this is nice to have, I don't need it or seek it," he told her.

"And Lauren? Is she content?"

They both stopped. There was no stare down as there'd been with Wyatt. In fact, Sebastian didn't look at her no matter how hard Viola tried to capture his gaze.

She pressed her hand to his bicep once more, ducking her head to make him see her. "How much longer do you think Lauren will be happy with phallic statues as gifts? Women like their comforts, and the older we get, the more we treasure them. How soon before you turn out like them?" She jerked her head toward Mike and Michelle's tent.

Lauren was on her feet a second later. Somehow she managed to stay riveted in place. Obviously the Prentices had been monitoring them *very* closely if Viola knew about the statue Sebastian had made. It was beyond rude and bordered on stalking. Confronting Viola would solve nothing at this point. Sebastian was the one who needed to know it was crap, that Lauren needed nothing more than his arms around her and to spend eternity by his side.

Viola slinked back into her den, but her words remained. Doubt sagged Sebastian's shoulders and flickered across his face, matching patterns cast by the torchlight. His remaining steps to their tent looked weighted. Lauren met him halfway.

"No," she whispered, capturing his whisker-roughened face between her palms. "Never. Don't think any of that for a minute."

She pulled his lips between hers, nipping gently. "I love you more than life itself. I always have. I always will. You are all I need." She traced her tongue over the bow of his mouth. "You are all I want."

He clutched her to him, hands gripping her butt. Deep breaths inhaled her scent, and she imagined him between her legs doing that same thing before he mapped her pussy with his tongue.

"Come love me, Sebastian," she whispered. "Let's forget the day and tomorrow. Let's just have tonight."

He nodded, kissed her nose, her mouth, pressed his growing erection into her stomach. Then he tucked her under his arm and led her to their tent.

A flick of his wrist untied the flaps. Lauren caught the zipper tab and sealed them in. They left the windows open for air. The screens were dark enough to keep anyone from seeing inside. And if they tried to peek...who cared?

His pocket flashlight guided them in the dark interior. Once behind the mosquito netting, he flicked off the light. They undressed in the dark, their eyes adjusting slowly from bright flashlight to the dimmer light filtering in from the torches. The sounds of clothes rustling, boots clunking to the floor, and their ragged breaths were as erotic as the deepest moan. Each promised what was to come -- that first skin-to-skin touch, the kisses that grew more urgent with every pass, hot hands revisiting the curves and planes of each other's bodies, that breath-taking plunge that made them one.

Lauren's pussy contracted. Her clit swelled in anticipation. Warm, sticky juices trickled to her labia and threatened to overflow down her thighs.

She grappled for the double cot behind her and stretched out. The wood sighed beneath her weight. The sound wiggled through her. More foreplay for her senses.

Sebastian knelt at her feet and traced lazy circles up and down her legs as he crawled upward. Lauren spanned her hands around his hip, teasing the base of his hard cock with feather touches. The catch in his breath called to her, telling her things words could not express.

She looped thumb and forefinger around the root and stroked up the hot length. Moisture waited for her at the tip. Lauren smeared it over the head, then brought her thumb to her lips and slurped it off loudly.

A growl rumbled in his chest. He wrapped her legs around his waist and thrust into her cunt. She wedged her heels in the cleft of his buttocks, locking him in place.

"I love how it feels when we're just like this," she said softly against his ear, then captured the lobe in her teeth.

Sebastian sucked a breath through his teeth and tweaked her nipples, rolling them into elongated points between his thumbs and forefingers until she writhed beneath him. She rolled her pelvis into his, grinding hard so that her clit felt every brush of body to body. He pushed deeper, kneading her breasts, pinching her nipples, nuzzling his whiskers into her neck while his teeth and lips made her skin his personal playground.

She felt herself coming, but the climax eluded her. Lauren thrashed her head to one side, digging her fingers into his back in frustration. Sebastian wedged his hand between them, flicking his thumb over her swollen clit.

She arched into the caress, moving her legs higher up his torso until they were anchored around his chest. Another muffled growl rumbled from him. He pivoted into her, slowly at first, then with the frenzied determination of a caveman.

Her body sang. Her heart thudded. His thrusts came hard, fast, deep, each one making him hotter and harder than the last. And all she could do was hold on...and feel...and wonder at the sensations only he could bring.

Lauren fought the moans she wanted to lose. They came out as short gasps and were echoed by his own. His cock felt like steel pounding into her. She clutched it tighter. Contractions rippled through her.

"God," he gasped out, "I love when you do that."

All sensation drew inside her, then exploded out. He drove deep, body quaking with the force of his own climax. She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time, wanted to never let go. Wanted...wanted to feel their baby grow inside her and watch it cuddle in Sebastian's strong arms after its birth.

She thought about telling him that in those sweet caresses and kisses of afterglow. The raspy *rrawow!* of a jaguar shot them out of the cot. Sebastian rolled them onto the floor, keeping Lauren protected beneath him.

"Jeez...that scared the hell out of me," she said in a rush of breath.

"Me, too." His heart raced in time with hers.

"It sounded like it was right outside the tent."

"I doubt that. The sound of the generator would be enough to make it wary. It'd also want to avoid the light, and there are men still outside. We would have heard them shouting."

She admitted all those things sounded logical, but it didn't appease her rattled nerves. "Maybe they were too busy shitting themselves."

Sebastian chuckled. "Ain't that the truth? I'll be glad to take a look though."

"No...you're right. The men out there are better armed than you are right now." She feathered her hands over his shoulders. "Let's try to get some sleep, but make sure you're no more than a hand-grasp from me."

"Or closer." He kissed her quick, then helped her to her feet.

Their eyes had finally adjusted to the dark. Torchlight filtering through the windows was enough to help them dress and shove the cots against each other. Sebastian's hand on her hip spanned the gap between them when they lay down. Lauren laced her fingers over his. In minutes his deep breathing signaled sleep.

She clutched her fist into her cleavage, ready to pluck her multitool from her bra at the first sign of a threat. Gaze locked on the window, she waited.

One by one the torchlights winked out. Her eyelids grew heavy. And in that space between awake and sleep, she saw the jaguar's golden eyes and knew it was coming for her.

## Chapter Thirteen

Wyatt stalked through the jungle. Joaquin had left a trail a child could have followed. In less time than it took to undress, he saw Joaquin's amber eyes glowing at him. In jaguar form, Joaquin had all four paws in the air, rolling his black, furry back in the leaves.

Wyatt shifted into human form and stood over him. "Did you have to be so obvious?"

Joaquin leaped to his feet, shifting at the same time. Arms wrapped around his torso, he tossed back a silent laugh. "I wanted to make sure you knew I was here. And you have to admit, it's really funny scaring everyone like that. We never get to do that in the city."

Under normal circumstances Wyatt would agree, but they did have a job to do. He supposed he couldn't fault Joaquin for his lapse too much. They'd been away from home for a long time. Even he felt the need to roar into the jungle that its lord had returned.

"It put Prentice on alert that we're here," he said.

Joaquin's humor faded. He took a step toward Wyatt, thumb jammed into his chest. "He'd be a fool to think we weren't. I want him to *fear* us."

"Now who's being sloppy?"

Joaquin gave a small laugh and shook his head. "There are many cenotes in this immediate area. It's impossible to check them all out. The men and I will follow as best we can."

"Take care," Wyatt told him. "They have crossbows with Tree of Life ceiba arrows." A hit from any arrow was lethal, but these would make it an agonizingly slow death.

"We'll keep to the shadows," Joaquin replied, then pressed close. "Prowl with me tonight. Like we used to. Let the jungle give us strength, remind us of what we used to be before they took it all away."



At that point only one thing sounded more appealing, and Wyatt knew he couldn't have that. Joaquin shifted and leaped into the dark. Amber eyes glanced back. Pulling in a breath of the jungle, Wyatt joined him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The son of a bitch pissed on our tent!" Jeremy shouted for the fifth time.

As if they couldn't smell it. The entire camp reeked of jaguar urine. Claw marks gouged in the trees around the perimeter also defined the cat's territory. It was a big male, too, dwarfing Sebastian's hand when he spread it over the paw-print left in the dirt right next to their window.

"This thing must be huge." Mike copied Sebastian's measurement, then whistled.

"Why is it stalking us?" Michelle hugged her midriff. She'd been rooted to the same spot since they'd crawled from their tents at dawn.

No one had gotten much sleep the night before. Their visitor hadn't exactly terrorized them, but he'd made his presence known. At one point he'd even lounged against Sebastian and Lauren's tent. Sebastian was able to catch a glimpse of the cat. It *was* huge, easily four hundred pounds of pure muscle, black as pitch, with shining golden eyes.

Considering how rattled Prentice's men were this morning, it was a wonder no one tried to shoot the cat last night. That was the general reaction when one was spotted -- shoot to kill no matter what government regulations said. At least they'd had the good sense not to fire on the animal. In these close quarters, no one would have been able to get a clear, safe target. A bad aim would have sent an arrow through anyone's tent and killed someone.

"Why are the men so spooked? The poor thing was only having a look around." Trina's gaze was on the men gathered in the mess tent.

She'd been oddly calm during all this, as if this sort of thing happened every day. Even Lauren had been, and still was, on edge about their prowler. She'd spent most of the night tucked in a tight ball.

Wyatt tried to calm Liam's crew. They all wanted to pack up and leave. Sebastian kept hearing the Mayan word *balam*, jaguar, lord of the jungle. With a cat that big, he couldn't argue the comparison.

Liam sat at the long table that had served as Wyatt's bed the night before. It was the only available spot off the ground for him to sleep. Rest had put some color back into Liam's face, but he still didn't look fit enough for a jungle hike. A successful trip depended on the support of the men he'd hired. Judging from the conversation, it looked like Liam's deep pockets might not be enough to dissuade them.

"Maybe some breakfast will calm everyone down. I know it would help me take my mind off last night," Lauren said, more to herself than to anyone else. Without another word,

she trudged to the mess tent, tapped the cook on the shoulder, and was given full access to his kitchen. Michelle and Trina quickly followed.

Sebastian scanned the immediate area as he stood. Paw prints were everywhere. The jaguar had certainly made itself at home. That could mean it would continue to be drawn to the area, and they'd be relatively safe from it elsewhere. Or it could mean it had been attracted to them and would follow. It was difficult to know.

"What now?" Mike asked.

He didn't have an answer. At this point it wouldn't upset him if they turned around and went back home. Their obligation to the Prentices would be fulfilled, and they could end this farce. Still, there was a part of him that wanted to see what Liam claimed to have found. After all, the man had spent his career searching, had been to hell and back for his discovery. And he was supposedly depending on it to cure him.

Sebastian glanced toward the mess tent. Handshakes were being passed around. They'd obviously come to an agreement. Liam returned to his tent, Wyatt trotted their way, and the remaining group sat down at the tables and waited for the women to finish cooking.

"We're good," Wyatt said as he neared. "Back to the plan. Half the men here, half with us. We leave in an hour. Liam won't say how long the hike in will take. He's also the only one who seems to know the way." He tapped his head. "Says the map's up here."

Mike snorted. "Considering the condition the old fart's in, I hope to hell he doesn't get us lost."

With fourteen people cutting through the jungle that wasn't likely, but Sebastian knew stranger things had happened. He wasn't willing to leave anything to chance. He'd make sure they had a trail to follow out.

Breakfast disappeared as quickly as Lauren, Michelle, and Trina could put it out -- ham, scrambled eggs, the ever present tortillas, all washed down with pot after pot of coffee. There were no thanks, no compliments on the food. The men ate, then hurried to prepare for the hike. Precisely an hour later, Liam and Viola stepped from their tent.

They were dressed in khaki from head to toe. Thick walking sticks were clutched in their hands. Viola's hair was stuffed under her safari hat. Neither said a word.

Liam scanned the gathering. The equipment to be used for the duration of their stay was stacked on top of a large litter. Four of the men stood at each corner waiting to hoist it to their shoulders. The other two men took up guard positions, crossbows at the ready.

It didn't bolster Sebastian's confidence that there were only two armed men protecting them in what was potentially a life-threatening situation. Judging from the machete strapped to Jeremy's waist, he didn't like it either.

Hands royally braced at his waist, Liam nodded his approval.

Viola touched his arm. "The day's on us."

He sniffed, sighted his direction, and headed that way, his wife at his heels. The rest of them followed. Greenery closed in around them. Liam's armed men took the lead and flank while the equipment carriers stayed up front with Liam and Viola. That left the rest of them in the middle of the column.

Using Wyatt's and Michelle's bodies as shields, Mike monitored their progress on a portable GPS. Trina scuffed her heels or dug her toes into the trail. Lauren constantly broke off branches as she walked by. Sebastian wasn't as discreet -- he cut notches with his Leatherman, adding extra cuts each time they'd shift position with the sun. The pedometer at his waist marked off their distance.

The quiet jungle struck him as odd. There were always birds squawking overhead in the rain forest and monkeys pitching a fit because a human dared trespass. But since they'd arrived yesterday, the only wildlife heard or spotted had been the jaguar. He tried not to think about the ancient tribe surreptitiously watching, following, waiting to attack. But his mind kept wandering to the Colliers' brutal murders. He thought he saw shadows tracking them deep within the trees, and tried to discount them as being too large for a human. That begged the question of what they might be, and he didn't like that thought either.

They'd kept a slow, steady pace for a little more than an hour when they came to a clearing baked hard by the blazing sun. Sebastian checked the pedometer at his waist -- they'd gone one mile. Liam hadn't hesitated one step of the way.

"This is where we'll set up camp." Liam motioned to his men.

The ones carrying the equipment litter set it down with a chorus of groans. Propped against the load, they chugged water from their canteens. Sweat ran in rivulets down their faces.

Liam waved the rest of them forward. "We're almost there. About five hundred yards. It's beautiful. Come on."

"Not without a weapon." Mike took a crossbow and quiver of arrows one of the guards automatically handed his way.

*So much for not understanding English.*

Liam trotted ahead down a gentle slope of limestone rubble. Viola did her best to keep up. She skidded on the loose rock, arms windmilling to keep her balance. Somehow she managed to stay upright.

Sebastian could see the yawning chasm ahead. Water beneath the porous stone had washed a ten-foot high cave into the underground system. All they had to do was walk inside.

In their haste to get inside, the Prentices didn't pause. The dark passage swallowed them from view. Wyatt didn't hesitate to follow them.

"I might be lazy, but I'm not stupid." Jeremy stared into the abyss, hands on hips. "I'm not going in there without a rope trail to guide me out."

No one argued. Fortunately, they'd been prepared to rappel into the cenote, and each was well-equipped with more than enough rope to let them have a good look around inside. It didn't take long to tie their nylon lines together. After securing the end around a sturdy tree trunk, they started forward once more, flashlights pointed toward the darkness. Sebastian reset his pedometer and pulled Lauren to the rear with him. He wanted to put as much distance as possible between them and Mike, who now juggled the flashlight and the loaded crossbow while he tried to also keep one hand on the rope. Not a good combination.

Damp sand cushioned their steps as they walked beneath the arched entrance. The path angled down while the roof vaulted overhead. Sebastian swung the beam of his flashlight in that direction. Darkness swallowed it, but not before he got a glimpse of massive stalactite formations surrounding them.

"You won't need those lights." Liam's voice echoed around them, making it impossible to know where he stood. "Turn them off and let your eyes adjust; you'll see what I mean."

One by one they did as he suggested, but Sebastian kept his in a tight grip just in case. Lauren stepped closer to him.

The change was subtle at first, but with each second that passed it became more pronounced. The limestone surrounding them glowed with inner light.

"It's magnificent, isn't it?" Liam's disembodied voice asked. "There isn't a cathedral in the world that can match it. And it's the teaser. Come on. You'll see."

They walked forward, still keeping one hand on the rope at all times. Steps were carved into the path, threading them through the columns and into the heart of the cavern. Blue-white light beckoned ahead.

Mike, Michelle, and Jeremy hurried on. Lauren and Trina slowed to a near stop. Around the final column Sebastian got his first good view. It took his breath away.

The ceiling curved high overhead. Holes eroded there in an arch let the sunshine beam down into a vast pool of crystal blue water. It filled from crevices in the wall, trickling down like a garden fountain. Pools of water were stair-stepped higher and lower.

A sandy shore opened up and let them spread out. Wyatt's backpack lay discarded nearby, but he was nowhere to be seen. Lauren and Trina hung back as Sebastian moved to the water's edge. The water was so clear he could see to the rocky bottom ten feet right below. "Magnificent" didn't come close to describing it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lauren's feet were rooted in place. This was it -- the place in her nightmare. She knew every niche that could hold a torch. Could feel the wet sand give beneath the clutch of her fists. Heard the voices that tried to help...and the ones determined to kill. Shivered against the water's chill. Screamed as pain and heat seared through her body. Knew of the skeletons of those who'd gone before littered in another cenote deeper inside.

"Oh, my God," Trina whispered. "I've been here before. I thought it was a bad dream, but now..."

*The scratch!* Lauren grabbed Trina's arm, holding tight when the woman tried to pull free. The mark was barely visible, but still there.

"Didn't Wyatt give you any ointment for this?" She shook Trina's arm.

"I told him I was fine." Anger darkened her face. "Let me go. You're hurting me."

"Trust me, you're far from fine," she said through clenched teeth, and slung her arm away. Damn Wyatt for not insisting.

Trina rubbed at her wrist. "Now that you've crushed every bone in my wrist, I'd have to agree."

"We need to find Wyatt quickly." She glanced around, but still didn't see him anywhere. Liam, however, watched them from a small ledge of rock nearby. Sunlight from above heightened dark shadows in his face, giving him a demonic gleam.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the waters of life." He hopped down and sauntered their way. Viola was nowhere in sight.

Liam's pack was gone; so was his shirt. His khaki trousers were wet and plastered to him. Drops of water clung to his gray chest hairs. "One dunk and I can feel vitality coursing through my veins." He snickered. "Doubt...everywhere I look. How about a practical demonstration?"

He plucked one of the arrows from the quiver on Mike's back and held it up. "This is made of ceiba, from the Tree of Life itself, the tree of creation."

Liam dipped the arrow into the water. Instantly leaves and buds appeared. A wide grin cut across his face as he held up the reborn wood for them to see.

Lauren wanted to pass it off as a magic trick. Instinct overruled logic and told her to get the hell out of there. She walked toward Sebastian, intent on snagging his arm and doing just that.

Liam tossed the arrow at their feet. It clattered, rolled, and came to a stop at Jeremy's toes. He unsheathed his machete and nudged it.

The old man's booming laughter thundered around the cavern. "Suspicious...good. It will only give more weight to your reports. Explore while the light is good. We'll start the work tomorrow." He waved his arms wide to encompass the entire cenote. "You'll find pools layered throughout. After three o'clock you'll lose the full effect of the sun. I'm going to see where Viola's gone. Probably found something new and wonderful as always."

He hopped up the stones like a ten year old and disappeared into a wide niche in the rock.

The men squatted beside the arrow. "Is it real?" Sebastian wanted to know.

Jeremy gingerly picked it up and hacked it in two. Milky sap oozed out. "Looks real to me. If he did a bait and switch on us, he was master magician perfect."

"Try another one." Mike pulled an arrow out of the quiver.

Jeremy gave it a healthy whack. The blade glanced off the wood, splintering it, and nicked his knee in the process. Blood soaked his trousers.

"Shit, shit, shit." He scooped up some water in his cupped palm and poured it over the wound. They could see it clearly through the tear in his pants. Blood washed away, leaving white skin beneath and revealing a piece of wood poking up. Jeremy yanked the splinter out and doused the wound again. The skin knitted shut right before their eyes.

"Holy shit!" He scooted away from the water's edge.

"That's putting it mildly." Michelle hoisted her pack from her shoulders. "I'm going to see if I can find the source." She scrambled up the rocks without another word.

"How does it feel?" Mike pulled the material away from Jeremy's knee to look.

"Tingly all down my leg. A little warm. My head's buzzing."

Symptoms Lauren was much too familiar with. "The arrows are poisoned." She grabbed Sebastian's arm. "Just like the darts."

"Wyatt's pack's over there. I'll get the ointment. Get his leg bared."

Lauren pulled her multitool out of her bra as she fell to her knees beside Jeremy. His eyes bugged out, and he was doing a crab crawl back. Mike held him in place, grabbed the pant material on either side of the hole, and ripped it away. Dark tendrils of spidery veins were visible in the bright sunlight. They grew with each second.

"Toes!" he screeched. "It's in my toes."

Trina fumbled with the lace, tugging the boot while she loosened. It popped off, sending her rocking on her heels and then tipping over into the water behind. Weighted by her backpack, she plummeted to the bottom.

A woman's scream reverberated throughout the cavern, constant and never-ending. Mike whipped around to see where Michelle was. Sebastian tossed the jar of ointment to Lauren and dove into the water to help Trina.

She caught the jar with one hand and grabbed the guide rope with the other, then threw the end into the water for a lifeline. Mike dropped his pack, started in the direction Michelle had gone, then jumped into the pool.

Lauren wedged herself into the sand. The rope grew taut and pulled, dragging her through it.

Jeremy jumped behind her, looping his arms around Lauren's waist to add some weight. Momentum yanked them forward. Air burst from Lauren's lungs with the impact. She found herself staring into the water's depths and the struggle below.

Trina's pack had caught on something. Sunlight glinted off Sebastian's Leatherman as he tried to cut her free. Mike tugged at the straps. Stones rolled beneath their feet, stirring small pockets of silt.

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" Michelle's screams were headed back. Whether she'd seen Trina fall and was freaked out over that, or something else, Lauren couldn't guess and sure as hell couldn't look.

Loose rock skittered under her feet, plunking into the water above the men. Lauren felt herself slipping. Rope burns cut into her arms. Where the hell was everybody?

Jeremy's grip tightened. She could hear him grunting with the effort to keep her onshore. Water sluiced over Lauren's arms, caressing her, trying to pull her into its embrace.

The weight on the rope grew. She bit back the panic that told her she was going to be yanked in and tried to wiggle back. Jeremy helped her gain every inch.

Lauren rocked onto her ass and braced her feet under her. Her muscles quaked from the effort. Just when she was certain she couldn't hold on any longer, the men burst to the surface gasping for breath, Trina limp but alive between them.

It took all of them to hoist her out. She rolled onto the shore and coughed up water. Dark spider veins crawled up her arm from the scratch.

"I don't feel so good." Trina gasped for breath between coughs.

Lauren fumbled for the jar of ointment. Her hand shook as she unscrewed the lid. Dual screams -- Jeremy's and Michelle's -- propelled it out of her hand.

Life screeched into slow motion. Mike dove for the crossbow and swung it around. Lauren whipped her gaze in that direction and saw golden eyes hovering just beyond Michelle as she scuttled down the rocks. The black jaguar crouched low. Mike fired. It leaped up, a pained *rrow* telling them the arrow had hit flesh, but the projectile itself clattered free to the ground.

Mike loaded another arrow and aimed again as the cat landed on another rock behind Michelle. "Don't move," he shouted.

Michelle glanced over her shoulder, screamed, and dove for the next rock.

Wyatt burst from a side tunnel, shouting, "Nooo," as the cat crouched for another leap.

The arrow pierced its chest in mid-air. Its blood-curdling screech morphed into a human howl as the jaguar transformed into a man.

"What the fuck?" Sebastian gasped out.

Lauren stared, too stunned to move.

The man's eyes and mouth formed a shocked "O". Blood seeped over his torso as his body crumpled to the ground. The arrow stuck in the ground, suspending him for a moment or two before the weight of his body slid down the shaft and rolled toward Michelle.

Mike raced to Michelle's side, yanking her to safety as Wyatt scrambled to catch the man before he hit the water.

Another black shadow leaped before Wyatt -- another jaguar. Mike swung the crossbow up, firing without aiming. The arrow scored Wyatt's side. He screamed and clutched the wound, yet still struggled for the water's edge. The jaguar landed before him. Mike aimed.

Wyatt slammed his hand up. "No! Don't!"

The jaguar shifted into a naked man -- the same one who'd driven her and Sebastian home from the museum in what now seemed an eternity and light years away from the reality Lauren once knew.

He grabbed Wyatt and held him in place, kept him from collapsing from the pain in his side. "Stop. There's no helping him now. If you go in, you're finished."

"I know, Joaquin," he nearly sobbed. "I know."

Lauren watched in continued horror as the dead man's blood stained and clouded the water. The pool rippled in ever-increasing circles. Leaves sprouted above the surface, then branches shot toward the sun, impaling the man on what had been a mere arrow minutes before. Lauren squeezed her eyes closed against the nightmare image, wondering if she still slept from days before. Trina's muffled cry had Lauren opening them. Leaves poked from Trina's fingernails. Tree roots wiggled from Jeremy's toes.

"Sebastian!"

Even as she called him, Lauren did the only thing she knew to do. Hands trembling, she scooped out a glob of Wyatt's ointment and smeared it over Trina's scratch. The effect was instant. Leaves withered and fell. Trina stopped hyperventilating. Fear, however, remained. Lauren doubted it would ever go away. Hers wouldn't.

"Jeremy," she gasped out and jerked around to him.

Sebastian skidded to his knees beside them. "Goddamn, what the fuck's going on?"

"Cut them off," Jeremy said through pants of breath. "Cut me loose."

Sebastian wiped ointment over the site of Jeremy's original wound. His hands quaked as much as hers. Nothing happened. Lauren worked the substance down his leg and still nothing. The roots grew, seeking a firm hold between the rocks, searching for the waters that would give it life.

"Cut him," Wyatt called out, his voice raspy.

Supported heavily by Joaquin, he made his way to them. Mike pulled Michelle back, putting as much distance between them as he could. Lauren wished she could do the same. Sebastian's hand on her shoulder told her to be prepared to run, but she knew it would be at his expense. Nothing would make her budge and leave him behind to *this*...whatever the hell it was.



"The wound has to be open to work." Wyatt's body changed from human to sleek, black jaguar and back again, like she'd blinked, and it had happened. "Cut him."

Sebastian stared at him, then yanked his Leatherman from his pocket and peeled the knife out. "Sorry," he told Jeremy, then held him down and whipped the blade over his knee.

Jeremy arched into the pain. Lauren slapped the ointment over the wound. A weary sigh eased him into the ground. The roots withered and dried to dust. His breathing eased, his eyes closed.

Wyatt sagged to the ground beside Sebastian and Lauren. "They'll sleep now, as Lauren did. I could use some of that myself right now."

Golden eyes glowed at them.

"Good God," Sebastian gasped. "What *are* you?" He caught Lauren's arm and pulled her behind him.

"We come from an ancient race, once blessed by the gods." Joaquin waved his hand, indicating the area behind them.

Lauren dared to look only after Sebastian did. Her sharp intake of breath mirrored his. Four more jaguars guarded the entrance from where they'd come. As they watched, they changed into the shape of naked men.

"All is secure, my lord," one said, stepping to the forefront. "Both camps are ours."

And they were now surrounded.

## Chapter Fourteen

Lauren fisted Sebastian's shirt. They were still too close to Wyatt. He was hurt, but could easily grab them, as could Joaquin. Behind the men, Mike pulled Michelle further up the bank away from the current threat. There wasn't any hope of escape for the rest of them.

"No," Wyatt pulled in a hard breath and reached out to Sebastian, "there's nothing to fear from us. We're on the side of right. Trying to rid the world of an evil that has existed far too long."

It was insane. *This* was insane.

"Don't believe him." Liam's shadow cut through a beam of sunlight seconds before his body appeared. "*They* are abominations. Not worthy to live. Genetic horrors." He pointed to Mike. "Shoot them while you have the chance. They've killed all my men."

"Lies. They're all on their way home." Joaquin jerked his finger toward the older man. "He's the one who should die. He and his mate."

"Leave us out of this." Sebastian lifted his palms.

Lauren didn't know how he managed to sound so calm. She was quaking inside.

"Let us all go, and you deal with each other on your own terms." Sebastian looked from one to the other. "We aren't a part of this."

Liam chuckled. "Wyatt made you a part of this months ago. He and his little band of kitties. Think about it... He was the one who wanted the funding and exhibit. He was the one who thrust us into each other's paths."

Sebastian stretched to his feet. "But this expedition is yours, Liam."

Liam's cold blue eyes flickered with surprise at being caught in his own tale.

"Kill them." Wyatt clutched Sebastian's wrist and tugged him down. "Kill them before they can take you. They want your bodies. Yours and Lauren's. So they can live on as they've

done for all these millennia. They'll steal your bodies, send your souls into oblivion. Just like they did to Ka-ra. Just like they've done to thousands of others."

"Have you ever heard a more fanciful tale?" Liam strolled their way; a vine was looped in his hand.

The jaguar men behind him edged closer. No one was armed except for Mike, and he was hauling ass out of there with Michelle as fast as he could...or else getting themselves hopelessly lost in the bowels of the cenote. Dirt and rocks skittered from under their feet as they disappeared.

"Until a short time ago, I didn't believe in shape-shifting jaguars either," Sebastian shot out.

Liam gave him an indulgent laugh. "Can you believe it now? Maybe there's something in the water. A hallucinogen? Think about it. What makes more sense? Don't let his delusions sway you. Look at all I've given you, all I promised." He laughed again, as if he were placating a child. "You and Lauren will be wealthy beyond your wildest imaginations. Viola and I made you our heirs before we left."

Why would they do such a thing? Unless what Wyatt said was true. Is that what happened with the Colliers? Liam and Viola used to *be* them until newer, more appealing host bodies came along?

"No." Blood seeped through the hand Wyatt held against the wound. His body kept shifting in and out from one form to the next. "They'll trade bodies, not use them. You'll be forced into their old bodies, ones that are starting to wear out on them."

"Then killed," Joaquin finished for Wyatt. "Like the Colliers and all those before them. They are skinwalkers. Legend says they were evil cast off from the Tree of Life. The darts, the arrows as well. All they need is a drink from the waters of life to be resurrected. It takes little wood to grow. All it needs is a body and water to spark new life. And only one thing can destroy them."

Viola's cackle echoed through the cavern, sending chills up Lauren's spine. "Listen to his story. Tales of a madman." She sauntered out from the niche where Mike and Michelle had gone. A wooden stake, dripping with blood, was clutched in her hand; the crossbow was in the other.

"It's the truth." Wyatt's hand was still clutched around Sebastian's wrist. He lifted the bloodied one to Lauren's neck. "You held a piece of Ka-ra's soul inside you. You know the truth." He yanked her down and covered her lips with his, forcing her tongue to mate with his.

Images slammed into Lauren's head. The mind-link fused Lauren, Sebastian, and Wyatt, sharing knowledge that was too much to speak, too fanciful to believe, and too dangerous to discount.

Just as quickly as he'd grabbed them, Wyatt -- El-ian -- shoved them away. "The jaguar will protect you."

Sebastian curled his fingers around his multitool and wiped the blade over Jeremy's leg, covering it with the ointment. He took a stance between Lauren and the Prentices. Lauren hurried to treat Wyatt, then retrieved her own Leatherman from where she'd left it beside Jeremy.

Wyatt's nostrils flared with the intake of breath. His skin rippled, darkening, softening. A hint of a smile revealed sharp, pointed teeth. The glow in his eyes promised retribution for an eternity of pain. The men surrounding them shifted, closing ranks.

Lauren turned and stood by her husband, weapon drawn.

"Why must they always fight?" Viola said with a world-weary sigh.

She lunged and swiped her pointed stake at Sebastian. He blocked her move, clipping her wrist with his blade. Viola gasped and clutched her fist to her chest. Dark crawled over her, slowly disintegrating her into dust. Wisps of white streamed from her, forming transparent faces and bodies of the female souls she'd destroyed. They circled her, then shot upward toward the sunlight.

Wyatt, now a sleek black jaguar, snarled and leaped over their heads. His snout dripped with the salve.

What remained of Viola filtered to the ground in a pile of grit. Liam whipped around to run. The jaguars behind him blocked his escape. He spun around again, eyes wild, searching for an exit. Then massive jaws clamped over his neck. Bone crunched. Blood spewed from the slash before turning into black ash that rained to the ground. The cat gave him an extra shake, snapping his spine but holding on until nothing remained of the entity but cinder. Larger wisps, this time male, flew to freedom.

Wyatt shifted into human form and collapsed. Joaquin hovered over him, hand reaching for his forehead as he changed.

Sebastian squatted beside them. "I...I need to check on Mike and Michelle."

Joaquin's head snapped up. "They're gone. My friends and I will retrieve their remains, but I doubt there will be much. *She* would have --"

Lauren raised her hand. "Please...don't. We know what happened before."

Joaquin nodded, motioned to the other men, and hurried toward the passage.

Wyatt kept fading in and out, shifting back and forth.

Sebastian hesitated, then raked his hand down the black fur during a jaguar shift. "What can we do?"

"Take the salve and kill that tree," Wyatt managed to say quickly before the jaguar form overcame him again.

Sebastian nodded slowly, wrapped his fingers around the jar, and plunged into the water. Long strokes took him to the base of the tree. Treading water, he worked his way around it, slathering it with goo. Leaves tumbled down on him as it trembled. Branches cracked, dissolved into dust, and showered down.

Lauren shaded her eyes against the sunlight streaming into the cenote. "Watch out!"

Sebastian dove deep to avoid the fallout. Debris clouded the water. Lauren held her breath, debating on whether to jump in and search, or stay there and wait. Finally, he burst up on a gasp for air a mere foot from her.

"Did it work?" He did a slow crawl to the side.

Lauren reached to give him a hand up. The cenote no longer glowed. The waters were brown and ugly. The tree spawned nothing more than dust. "I think so."

He heaved himself over the side and slung water off his face.

She brushed shaking hands over his face and shoulders. Who the hell was ever going to believe this? She wasn't sure she did.

"Thank you." Wyatt's words were barely audible. He grimaced from the pain...in both his forms. "Thank you for letting me in one more time. For believing."

"Rest," Sebastian said, stroking his shoulder. "We'll have you out of here soon."

Wyatt nodded and closed his eyes.

Joaquin stepped up beside them and squatted down to their level. "Mike and Michelle Sutton are gone. You don't want to see what remains." He glanced around the cenote. "Now that its life force is gone, the cenote will start to collapse in upon itself. We need to leave."

He combed his fingers through Wyatt's hair/fur. "He's very vulnerable right now...physically and emotionally. He's lost the love of his life twice now." Joaquin lifted his head on a sad smile. "He thinks very highly of both of you. I hope you'll excuse any transgressions he may have made the last few days. What he and Ka-ra had was" -- tears swam in his eyes -- "as grand as your love."

Joaquin blinked and stood. "The men and I will get the litters. These three will be out for awhile. Watch over El-ian. Help keep him warm when he seems chilled. Dressing him at this point would be useless. His shifting would only shred the clothing."

"We won't leave his side until we know he's all right." The emotion in Sebastian's voice stole what little control Lauren had. She watched the men clasp forearms through a veil of unshed tears.

As Joaquin walked away, Sebastian retrieved Wyatt's backpack and knelt across from her. "I know how he felt," he said softly. "I know it all."

Lauren did, too. His pain. His loneliness. His desperation. And Ka-ra's, too.

"Loving you as much as I do, I have to say I'd do the same thing. Only I don't think I would have had the strength he did to let her go a second time."

“And they never had the chance to say good-bye.” She flicked tears away from her cheeks.

“No...neither time.” He blinked rapidly, clearing his own tears. “It’s not right. It’s just not right.”

God, how could she possibly love Sebastian more than she did right now?

“Ready?” Two of the men placed a litter beside Wyatt. They’d dressed quickly and wasted no time mobilizing to carry out the incapacitated.

“Wait.” Sebastian pulled off his shirt and covered Wyatt’s groin where he would be exposed in human form. “Now, we’re ready.”

## Chapter Fifteen

Sebastian sat outside their tent and watched the midnight stars. In less than four days, the world as he'd known it had turned upside down. If someone came to him with a story like this, he would have said they were nuts. And hadn't he thought just that when Liam first spouted his grand plan?

Now four people were dead -- make that two people and two skinwalking entities -- and he was surrounded by a bunch of shape-shifting jaguar people. *What do they call a group of jaguars? A pride? A leap? A jumble?*

"Here." Lauren nudged his bicep with a cold bottle of beer, already uncapped. "I have one for Wyatt, too, when he comes out."

He wrapped one hand around the bottle and the other around her knee as she sat next to him. "Is he doing okay, or does he need help?"

"He says he's good to finish dressing."

It'd been a rough several hours, though. Chills had quaked Wyatt's body halfway back to the main camp. They'd piled every piece of clothing they had on him to keep him warm, finally adding Lauren's weight to the litter to do so.

They'd made it back to the main camp shortly before dusk, and wasted no time putting him in their tent, curling their bodies around him. That was the only thing that worked. Magic in and of itself, in Sebastian's mind. It helped to further cement the decision he and Lauren had made.

"Joaquin says Trina and Jeremy were still groggy and bedded down for the night. They don't want to talk about what happened." What could talking about it do? It would change nothing.

He took a long drink, then said, "The cenote's already started to collapse. Joaquin said we'll be able to all fly out tomorrow."

Everyone would be told that the Prentices and Suttons were killed in a cave in. The Prentices' men were back in their own homes, happily oblivious and very well paid. No one would be any the wiser. Hell, they wouldn't believe anything else anyway.

"Where is everyone?" She craned her neck for a look around.

Sebastian snorted. "Prowling the jungle like all jaguars do."

Lauren rested her cheek against his upper arm. "What do we do if what Liam said is true -- that they made us their heirs?"

"I think it's safe to claim they weren't in their right minds at the time they made the change. Their money can go to the museum." He didn't want any of it...except for what had been promised to all of them before they left. They all deserved something after this... God, what could he call it?

The screened flap opened behind them as Wyatt stepped outside.

"Feeling more yourself?" Sebastian smiled up at him and Lauren offered him a beer.

Wyatt twisted off the cap and sat down. "More human, if that's what you mean."

"Lauren and I aren't going to have the sudden urge to use a litter box, spray the neighbor's house, or get mice, are we?"

"Very funny. Ha, ha." At least he was smiling a little. He took a drink and sighed. "The mind-link we shared won't have any effects, nor will anything else I've done." He gave a light laugh. "But you'll always have the memories."

Lauren cradled Sebastian's arm between her breasts. "And you'll always have us to talk with about it. Even though we know, we can't begin to imagine what you and your people have been through."

Wyatt gave a wry chuckle and stared at the stars. "It's hard for us to imagine it, too. We used to roam the jungle as cats by night, rule our cities as humans during the day. Life was good. We bothered no one. Lived extremely long lives, lived in peace. Until they found us. Imagine their surprise when they realized they'd captured the body of a shape-shifting jaguar. It was the first of many mistakes they made. They never used the bodies they stole long and quickly sought others. Our numbers have dwindled over the centuries, but we've been determined to find and destroy them. Each time we got close, they'd slip away."

"Are you the Braden in Braden Institute?" Sebastian asked.

Wyatt smiled and dropped his head. "No, that was Joaquin and Carmen's doing. They established the identities, the institute, then *disappeared* when the Titanic sank. We've been biding our time, hoping they'd be drawn in. It took a while, but..."

"I'll say." Lauren laughed lightly.

Wyatt smiled again. "We've learned to be patient. This time it paid off."

"Because of us," Sebastian said.



"Yes, and for that I apologize." Wyatt stared off into the trees. "Your discoveries, your lifestyle, your looks, everything about you made you the bait we had to take a chance on. It was Barry's idea, and the Prentices fell for it. But once I met you and got to know you, the task became harder."

"And this Maya tribe Liam talked about?" Sebastian asked.

"They never existed as far as we could tell. It was part of the lie the Prentices wove. Someone to blame."

They were quiet for several minutes, watching the stars, being with each other. Comforting in more ways than Sebastian could count. It was time. He plucked the tissue from where he'd placed it on the ground beside him and lifted it toward Wyatt.

"What's this?" Sebastian asked.

Wyatt froze, lip of the bottle almost to his lips.

"Don't bother answering," Sebastian said. "Joaquin already told us. He wasn't too happy."

Lauren wrapped her fingers over Wyatt's thigh. "We want you to know we understand. We would have done the same thing."

"We know your thoughts, your feelings, everything," Sebastian added. "We don't like that you and Ka-ra never got the chance to say good-bye. We'd like to give you that tonight."

"You mean..." He pressed his lips together and set the bottle down. "But I don't know if Ka-ra's essence still exists on the dart. Her soul was released in the cenote."

"We have the antidote for Lauren. You've already shown quite a skill in getting into my head. We're willing to do this for you."

"Come..." Lauren laced her fingers through Wyatt's hand, then through Sebastian's and tugged them both to their feet. Wyatt's resistance was token. Sebastian's was nonexistent. He and Lauren were determined to give the couple one last moment together.

They stepped inside the tent, and Sebastian zipped the door closed. Lauren clicked on the lanterns and then arched her neck to him. Grasping the dart tightly between his thumb and forefinger, Sebastian pierced her skin.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lauren sucked in a breath. The pain was sharp, like an inoculation, but fleeting. Warmth spread through her instantly, tickling down to her fingers and toes. The effect was much quicker this time, as if Ka-ra couldn't wait.

She closed her eyes. Love overwhelmed her. She felt a presence swoop into her senses. More heat. Her heart raced in anticipation. In her mind Ka-ra smiled.

Lauren pressed a palm to each man's chest. Their minds linked as one. Ka-ra called to him -- El-ian. But Lauren still thought of him as Wyatt.

Strong fingers wrapped around hers as Sebastian and Wyatt stepped into her aura. She parted her lips and turned her mouth to Sebastian. He pulled her lips between his, then slowly released them.

“Undress,” she whispered. “We are impatient.” Even as she spoke for herself and the extra soul she harbored, Lauren was taking off her clothes. A slow strip stirred the embers glowing deep inside her. Her pussy dripped with want, her clit thrummed for attention.

*They are beautiful men*, Ka-ra said.

*Indeed they are.* Lauren stretched her naked body onto the cot pads she and Sebastian had placed there earlier for Wyatt’s comfort...and now their pleasure.

Sebastian and Wyatt looked glorious standing beside her. Heavy cocks bobbed before them. She sat up and wrapped her fingers around each one. Sebastian grunted and thrust into the stroke. Wyatt stood as rigid as his erection, jaw clenched, fists at his side. Precum pearled at the tips of their penises. Smiling, Lauren flashed her tongue over one and then the other.

They cried out. Knees buckled. Still holding tight, she tugged them toward the makeshift bed. They stretched their long bodies next to her, the warmth of their skin, the strength each possessed, making her feel protected in a way Lauren hadn’t expected. The world could attack, and these men would keep her safe from harm.

Callused fingers circled her breasts, plumping the flesh until her nipples were puckered and aching at the tops. Together they pinched and twirled, elongating them until she was writhing for more, her body begging because words were impossible.

Wyatt blew over one, then suckled it gently between his lips. Sebastian feathered his tongue downward and dove into her navel. Lauren gasped at the sensation. Ka-ra cried out. Both men groaned.

Whiskers rasped against her breasts and stomach. Sebastian ran his fingers down to the cleft of her pussy, parting her labia. God, she was wet. Her clit so hard, she swore it lifted up to meet him.

Wyatt suckled deeper and squeezed her other breast. Lauren/Ka-ra lifted into the pleasure shooting through their shared body. His cock pushed against her side, trailing precum with each stroke.

And then Sebastian sucked her clit between his lips.

“Oh...God!” She tried to dig her fingers into Sebastian’s hair and grappled for a handhold on Wyatt. Both men dodged her efforts.

Lauren dug her fingers into the mat instead. She wanted to come...now. And again. And again. But she and Sebastian had talked and planned at great length while they’d waited for Wyatt to recover. This wasn’t meant to be a marathon fucking session. It was a bonding. They knew how they wanted it to go, and because all four minds were now linked, so did Wyatt and Ka-ra.

Sebastian dotted kisses to her inner thighs, calming her libido with the promise of more soon. Wyatt softened his touch, caressing one breast, gently circling his tongue around the other. A deep breath put a little space between them. Lauren's blood cooled, but her heart still raced, and Ka-ra grew impatient.

The men reached for the condoms she and Sebastian had "borrowed" from Jeremy's stash and tucked under the edge of the mat. She opened her palm, silently requesting they be given to her. Neither hesitated. She ripped open the first packet, eyeing which cock would be her first target. Ka-ra made the selection for her.

She placed it on Wyatt's erection, then looped her mouth around the head and rolled it on.

Wyatt tossed back a sound that was between a growl and a groan. Ka-ra snarled back and licked her tongue over her teeth. Lauren cupped Wyatt's sac and kneaded gently. His fingers flexed over his stomach as he fought the urge to grab her head and fuck her mouth. Waves of heat poured from his groin. He rolled to his back and pushed his hips up. Lauren rolled with him, licking and sucking while she tickled his balls with one hand and roamed through the hair dusting his navel with the other.

Sebastian lifted her hips as he crawled up behind her. A long lick from spine to clit brought her head up on a groan. Wyatt raked his fingers through her hair and pulled her mouth back to his cock. Lauren sucked him deep, tearing another growl/groan from him and Ka-ra.

She heard the other packet rip, and her body tightened in response. She straddled Wyatt's legs, parting her thighs and lifting her ass for Sebastian. Cool lube touched her slit. She sighed and crawled further up Wyatt's body. Sebastian probed her cunt slowly with two fingers, adding more lube there, spreading it over her labia and clit.

Lauren squeezed her breasts around Wyatt's cock and let him indulge in a few long strokes while her body went crazy over Sebastian's explorations. Then he focused on her anus. Lauren moaned as his fingers slipped inside, making her ready to take him.

She slithered her chest up Wyatt's body until their nipples kissed. His cock was poised just above her clit. One thrust and they'd be joined. Sebastian's hand curled around her hip, holding her steady while he nudged his dick against her rectum. Lauren shifted and eased down on Wyatt.

"Oh...yessss." His eyes rolled back in his head. Fingers clutched at her hip. His body quivered from the effort to hold back.

Lauren gave Sebastian a single nod. He pushed into her slow and steady, groaning with every centimeter he took. Four sighs echoed through their heads. They stayed locked as one while Lauren adjusted to the fullness. Her nod told them she was ready.

Slow, long strokes alternated inside her, stealing every breath Lauren tried to take. Pressure like nothing she'd ever felt before pooled in her core. Filled with hard, hot dicks, her clit lay against Wyatt's cock in pure rapture.

She pressed her cheek against Wyatt's chest, eyes closed to the wonder of it all while their deep groans merged with hers. His rapid heartbeat echoed in her ear, calling to Ka-ra. In her mind, Ka-ra's unfettered groans answered.

Sebastian and Wyatt tightened their hold on her. She knew how difficult it was for them to hang on. She squeezed her pelvic muscles. They plunged deeper, bodies shuddering. A ripple grew inside her, then burst forward. Four groans blessed the moment as they all came.

"I love you." Four voices.

*Good-bye, my love*, Ka-ra whispered.

*My beauty. My love.*

Lauren cried for their heartbreak. Soft kisses against her shoulders from both men told her it was all right.

Wyatt fumbled for the jar of ointment at the top of the mat. Sebastian unscrewed the top, then scooped out a glob and smeared it over the wound in her neck.

More heat seared her, fiery this time, not pleasant. Her stomach roiled, but stayed in place. And then Ka-ra was gone.

The three of them eased apart, and Lauren curled on her side. She was so tired. Sebastian draped a wool blanket over her. Wyatt combed her hair away from her face.

"Thank you both so much," his voice was choked with emotion. He blinked rapidly. A tear drifted down his cheek. The man's agony hurt Lauren's heart.

Wyatt pushed to his feet. "I think I'll take a walk and stretch my legs, join my friends in a prowl. The jungle finally looks at peace."

Sebastian tucked Lauren under his arm as Wyatt stepped into the night, human form morphing into the black jaguar. Golden eyes flashed their way before disappearing. A *rrow* followed.

"I think it's time to let some of the moths out of our savings," Sebastian said.

"Babies?" It suddenly seemed like the best idea in the world.

He nuzzled his whiskers against her neck. "At least one or two. I don't want to waste a single second of life."

She laughed lightly. "They'll be the first kids to ever have a shovel instead of a rattle."

"Not to mention a shape-shifting jaguar as a God-uncle."

"I'll let you do the explaining on that one."

They cuddled close and let dreams have them.

\* \* \* \* \*

El-ian watched them sleep. Peace settled within him, knowing love like that existed. God-uncle. He liked the sound of that. And who knew... Maybe a piece of Ka-ra still existed out there for him to find. Great love always managed to find a way.

*Come on.* Joaquin batted at his flank.

El-ian leaped around and ran after him, into the trees, into the night free of fear, like they had all those many centuries before.

 THE END 

## **Caitlyn Willows**

Caitlyn Willows is the pseudonym for award-winning author Catherine Snodgrass, who wanted to flex her writing muscles in the erotica genre. Readers will find the same award-winning quality from “Caitlyn” that they have come to expect from “Catherine,” but the stories will be steamier and more over-the-top. Always they will be action-filled...in more ways than one.

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