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Jewel of the Dragon

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Chapter One

"Alixandra Lancaster?"

Alix looked up with her smile of professional welcome, but the smile froze on her face. To her knowledge, such a gorgeous specimen of humanity had never before entered the door of her jewelry shop. Tall, dark, handsome and well built. Just how she liked her men. Not that she'd had one for a long time.

Used to spotting quality at a glance, Alix took in the smoothly tailored, dark suit and crisp, custom made white shirt instantly. His blue silk tie matched his suit. No flamboyance, but everything he had on spoke of excellence. He wore gold framed spectacles, something she only noticed when he moved his head slightly and the lenses glinted in the light. Very discreet.

He came forward, a friendly smile curving his full lips. "I'm Deverell Wyvern. I called about the Art Nouveau pendant, remember?" His English accent held a slight lilt; one Alix was unable to place, but she liked the seductive sound of his voice.

"Of course." Alix exchanged a glance with her brother, who stood behind the other counter in the shop, set at right angles to hers. "This is my brother, Clay Lancaster. We own Lancaster Jewelry."

Deverell Wyvern shook hands with Clay, who stepped out from behind the counter. Wyvern was a few inches taller than Clay, but leaner. Alix approved. Clay's penchant for boxing had given him broad shoulders and a bull neck. While Deverell Wyvern was no lightweight, she'd bet running was his sport, not weights. Broad shoulders, but a lean build, used with unconscious grace.

Alix blinked, forcing her thoughts back to what was immediately relevant. The sexiness of her customer was certainly not to the point, however much she wanted it to be.

The Art Nouveau style pendant Wyvern had called about was an exquisite piece and as such, costly. She didn't know if Deverell Wyvern knew the piece's other significance, the reason Clay had chosen to use expensive newspaper space to advertise it. That was why they had looked forward to this new client, and why Alix felt a fluttering in her stomach. Nervousness, that was all. Not raw, animal attraction.

The pendant would draw people in. One particular kind of person, and it might have actually worked. Wyvern had called the day the ad appeared, and seemed very interested in the jewel.

They'd checked his credentials. It wasn't difficult. Deverell Wyvern was British, but worked internationally for a large auction house. With that in mind, and desperate to squash her highly inappropriate lustful thoughts, Alix cleared her throat. "I was surprised you were interested in jewelry. Isn't your area of expertise old master paintings?"

His smile didn't waver one iota, but turned on to her it seemed to deepen, warming Alix right through. "You've checked me out, then. Very wise, considering the value of the items you have in stock." He glanced at the locked glass cases on the far wall, displaying some of the treasures they had for sale. A couple of pieces were locked up in the bank, but most were here. Security and insurance were amongst their greatest expenses, but even in this upmarket area of New York, robberies were alarmingly frequent. The shop was close to the Metropolitan Museum, not in a prime shopping area, they couldn't afford that, but discreetly situated near some very exclusive restaurants and art galleries, designed to attract the discerning customer.

"This is a private purchase," he explained. "Nothing to do with my work. My mother collects dragons. They're on our family crest. I saw this in your ad in the paper and I knew it was just the kind of thing she'd like."

Clay strolled unhurriedly back behind the counter, and brought out a black velvet box. "Here it is." He opened the box towards Wyvern, not adding any professional flourishes as he might have done with lesser objects. This piece didn't need any flourishes.

Alix knew the piece well. A large, enameled disc, emblazoned with a black dragon on a red ground. The dragon was brilliantly depicted, every scale perfect, his mouth open in a great roar, frozen in place forever. The eye was a tiny ruby, glinting balefully in the artfully set lighting of the shop. The medallion was thicker than one might expect, but pieces from the Arts and Crafts era often had a deliberately hand-made look. It hung on a heavy gold chain, which, when she had slipped it over her head earlier, came to just above her cleavage, but it had fastenings which enabled it to be worn as a brooch, too. It was a show-stopping jewel.

"Ah," Wyvern said, great satisfaction in his tone.

"What is it?" He sounded so happy. She exchanged a wary glance with Clay. Had they missed something? Was this a treasure, instead of merely a fine jewel? "While the piece is well done, it's not Fabergé or Liberty. At least, we haven't found the marks."

After his first, impulsive exclamation, Deverell Wyvern fumbled in his pocket and came out with a loupe, the antique expert's magnifying glass. He flicked it open and studied the jewel in silence, bending over where Clay had laid the box on the counter.

The vent at the back of his jacket fell open. Alix suppressed an appreciative and very unprofessional sigh. Wyvern had one fine butt, expensive wool fabric stretched invitingly over the hard mounds she could imagine under her hands. Alix's mouth watered.

What was she doing? It was months-almost a year-since she'd gone to bed with anyone, and that had been Joe, her boyfriend of the last three years. Alix just wasn't cut from the kind of material that drew men to her with lustful thoughts. She dressed to avoid it, and told herself she didn't need that kind of attention, but sometimes, just sometimes, she might have liked the occasional leer. Perhaps that was the cause of her sudden obsession. Perhaps she needed to look for someone else. She'd just been too busy recently.

Like what you see?

The voice in her head came so clear it was as though someone had spoken, but her ears told her no one had. It sounded like Deverell Wyvern's voice.

Shock reverberated through her. That inner voice meant they'd found one of those people her brother's friends called deviants. This was what they were looking for, why they'd advertised the pendant. Someone with Psi abilities, someone to capture, and destroy. Alix didn't want that happening. Not now she'd seen what they'd caught.

Clay belonged to an organization calling itself the Perfect Human Race, the PHR. She'd been a member once. They'd had no choice. Their parents had belonged, so they had. Brought up with the idea of the existence of other beings, beings that looked human but weren't, sometimes the world outside seemed odd to her. Once the PHR had abandoned any attempt at humanitarianism, formed into cells in a pseudo-military style, she'd had enough. She left the PHR. A shame Clay hadn't left, too, but she loved him, and she wasn't about to abandon him before she'd had a good try at getting him to leave, too.

She glanced at Clay but he seemed oblivious to the message she'd heard in her head.

She didn't reply, although she could have done. A low chuckle resounded in her head. Did he know she could hear him, sense his soft, insidious presence? Frantically, she slammed down all her mental barriers.

Clay cleared his throat and she jerked her head up to meet his gaze. He frowned, his heavy brow creasing over his blue eyes, asking her a question. She ignored the signal, just smiled and shrugged, as if nothing had happened.

Wyvern straightened. "What do you want for the jewel?"

Clay hesitated. "We were thinking around two thousand dollars."

"Two thousand is expensive for this kind of piece. But I'll pay that to make my mother happy." He reached into his inside pocket and came out with a black leather wallet.

"Wait." Clay glanced at Alix. "We might be able to come to an arrangement about the price."

Wyvern glanced from him to Alix, and something arced between them. He replaced the wallet in his pocket. "I'm in town for a week, so of course, I can give you some time, but I would rather take the pendant now. I thought I'd take a few days off, and there are few better places than New York to spend some time." His dark green gaze settled on Alix. "It would be better with company. I'm distressingly single." His smile invited her and she smiled back, enjoying the touch of intimacy, before she recollected his shocking communication with her.

Won't you talk to me?

He'd broken through her defenses as though they didn't exist. Working hard to hide her shock, Alix ignored him.

Clay pointedly ignored the moment of intimacy between his sister and their new client, but Alix knew he had seen it. Her brother's blue eyes were bright with speculation and she didn't need telepathy to know what he was thinking. 'We've hooked one!' "We have some paintings of our own we want to have assessed, and you're the expert in that field. If you'd look at those for us, we could come to an agreement about the pendant."

Wyvern frowned. "I'm not sure. Triscombe's Auction House pays for the exclusive use of my services."

Let me take you to dinner and it's a deal.

She tried to block, and nearly winced at the power he used to stop her. It was like a sudden, vicious headache, lancing through her head, a mental foot in the door she usually slammed against any kind of telepathic communication.

"If the paintings are worth anything, we could sell them through Triscombe's, if that's appropriate. That way I'll be fulfilling my contract. How did you come across them?"

"We inherited them when our parents died." Clay spread his large hands wide, in a gesture of friendship. "We have an apartment in Jersey City, where we keep the paintings. Why don't you join us for dinner tonight, then we can discuss the deal?"

Alix watched her brother set the bait. She couldn't bear it. *I'll talk to him; you don't have to have dinner with us. Take the pendant and go.*

She saw his shock, just in his moss green eyes, a spark of recognition. Oh no, she hadn't meant to do that. It was only panic when she remembered what Clay had in store for him.

"I couldn't possibly —" Wyvern began, but Clay interrupted him.

"No, I insist. Let me give you the address." He took a business card from the pile on the counter and scribbled on the back, handing it to Wyvern. "I've put down the phone number in case you get lost, but it's quite straightforward. What do you say?"

Wyvern took the card and stared down at it. "You're really most kind." *I want to get to know you.*

Oh God, what had she done? This man was telepathic, a target for the PHR. By luring him to their apartment, she put him in danger.

"You'd be helping us out," Clay said, smiling, "Our parents left a few things we're not sure about and these paintings were among them. We'd really appreciate your opinion. Then we could take your fee off the price of the pendant."

Wyvern smiled, the tension leaving his face, and slipped the card into his pocket. "I'd be glad to do that for you, as long as I can put the business Triscombe's way, if it's in our line." He meant, if the paintings were good enough.

"I think we'll be able to deal," Clay said calmly, as though it was a mere business arrangement. It was so much more than that.

Wyvern nodded, standing so still Alix thought he'd stopped breathing. It lasted a bare instant, then he turned and treated her to his charming smile. "I'll look forward to dinner. It will make a welcome change from hotel food." *And so much better than eating alone*, he added, the mental connection for her alone. The connection was too intimate for her, too close to the core she kept secret.

As soon as Wyvern left the shop, Alix turned on her brother. "He can't be one of them, he's too-too—" She bit her lip, angry at herself for nearly letting her attraction for the stranger slip. That was between her and her pillow for a few of nights to come, before she could persuade herself to forget him. She'd seen good looking men before and hadn't felt like this. Thoughts of heated embraces between the sheets came unbidden to her mind. Not a good idea when trying to conduct a business deal. And that communication. She had to stop them taking him, somehow.

"You know for sure?" Clay watched her carefully. "You managed to read his mind?"

"No." Perhaps that would do, although she hated lying to Clay. "If he really is a telepath, he'll feel it when I try to probe his mind, so I need to study him for longer, and get him relaxed. But he can't be a monster!" All her life she'd been told these people were monsters, out to destroy mankind, but she never believed it. Being telepathic didn't make him evil. But that was enough to condemn him in the eyes of the PHR. The only reason Clay kept her ability a secret was because she'd struggled all her life to overcome it, and her secret gave him an edge, both over her and in detecting the monsters he sought out and destroyed. Besides, he loved her. He'd risked his own neck to help her keep her gift quiet.

"What, you think they go around with horns and tail showing?" Clay sneered, his thin lip curling up. "Oh no, sis, they're far too subtle for that. They want to control us, kill us if they can. But we know that pendant means something to them. Remember how we got it."

She remembered, though she wished she could forget. The man the PHR had killed to get the jewel was a shapeshifter; at least Clay had told her so. She wasn't at all sure. Not sure at all. She'd seen the pictures, the scaly skin and the broken wings, the blood. It could have been faked, material glued on after death, just to attract the attention of the press and the politicians. Neither group had been interested, so they'd decided to take more drastic measures and capture one alive, using the pendant as bait.

"You can't treat people like that, Clay." He was her brother, and she loved him. He couldn't have been involved in the killing. Not that.

"I'd agree with you, if we were talking about *people*." His suave smile and professional smoothness totally gone, Clay crossed the wooden floor to reach out and take her hands in his, over the glass-topped counter. Jewels winked in the case under their linked hands. "These aren't real people, Alix. These are animals, and they're out to get us."

You've seen the proof."

She thought she had. Her parents had been long time members of the organization called the Perfect Human Race. Now she wasn't so sure of any of the teachings. It couldn't be right to fight evil with evil, whatever the reason.

While she'd left the organization, she wasn't immune to a lifetime's teachings. That all deviations from the 'normal' human form were bad, essentially evil. In her mind she knew it was wrong, but sometimes she had knee-jerk, Pavlovian reactions to things without thinking them through. And she had seen some terrible things, if only at second hand. She shuddered. Second hand was more than enough. "I saw pictures of people nearly drained of blood, others ripped to shreds. You told me they were vampires and shape-shifters. I thought vampires couldn't come out in the daytime?"

"They can't. But they're not the only evil out to get us. We know there's something here, in New York. A center of power, a place they meet. We've known for a long time, but they're clever and we've never been able to find out where it is. Now we've drawn one out. We *have* to take this chance, Alix." He regarded her for a long time, his blue eyes boring into hers, willing her to answer. "You know you have some traces of the perversion. I've done my best to help you to recover. You're my sister, Alix, and I won't have you hurt, but you have to help me in return."

Alix sighed and nodded. "I'll do it." If she refused, they would find another way of trapping Deverell Wyvern. She would lie; say she read nothing in the handsome stranger. That would stop the PHR persecuting him, and he could still have the jewel for his mother.

His grip tightened on her hands. "You like him, don't you?"

She nodded. She did, it was true. She found Deverell Wyvern deeply physically attractive. She should have known she couldn't hide that from her brother.

"Shame you never took to Steve. He's got the hots for you, babe, he always has, and he'd look after you, you know that."

Alix repressed a shudder when she thought of Clay's best friend Steve Garfield, with his heavy, muscle-bound body and small, pale blue eyes that watched her intently wherever she moved. Besides, she didn't want to get involved with any members of the PHR. She left the organization years ago, and she wasn't going back. Steve would look after her all right. As long as she behaved herself and did as he told her.

Clay's expression was serious, his heavy forehead creased with lines of worry. "This is dangerous work, but we're doing it for all the right reasons. We can't stop until we've won, but I won't put you in danger. But you like him." He grinned suddenly, the smile taking years off his appearance. "Tell you what. I'll tell Steve to call me. If you've read him by then, and you can't find anything, give me the word and I'll go."

She smiled. That was more like it. Sharing an apartment was a necessity if they wanted anywhere half decent, but they'd long ago arranged a code if they wanted to be alone. The other would make an excuse and leave. Yes, that would be good, then she could warn the man, get him away. And she'd have an hour or two alone with him, first. She didn't want to get close to anyone, afraid once they discovered her guilty secret they would label her a deviant, but what could an hour hurt?

"I won't be far away. Call me and I'll be with you in ten minutes. Just hit my number on your cell." He released one of her hands to reach across and pick up the black velvet box. He closed her hand over the pendant. "Probe his mind, babe, find out if there's anything there. Nothing else. We'll take it from there if you find something. His smile tightened, and Alix knew what he wasn't saying. They would take Deverell Wyvern and

kill him. "If you don't find anything, have a good time. But make absolutely sure first."

She swallowed. "You'll take him away if I find anything?"

"You betcha."

Not if she could help it. Nobody was going to suffer the fate of those poor farmers. She still suspected they had been killed, and then their bodies covered with some fabric that simulated dragon skin. Dragons didn't exist.

Striding through the lower entrance at Department Fifty Seven, Dev only had to flash his identity card at the security man to be allowed straight through. His aura, now he chose to reveal it, was instantly visible to the sensitive who patrolled the gate. They exchanged a small smile, one Talent to another. Dev Wyvern belonged here as he belonged in few other places.

As a member of the British equivalent to Department Fifty-Seven, housed in a quiet part of the MI6 building, Dev had met Cristos, the charismatic Deputy Director in charge of Department Fifty-Seven, and signed on as a 'consultant.' Very few Talents worked full time for the CIA, or any government agency anywhere. They had their own, very different agenda, and it didn't include national concerns. They had their own people to protect.

Dev threaded his way up, choosing the stairs rather than the steel elevator. He needed the exercise. He yearned for clear skies, wide spaces, and decided he'd take a real holiday after this assignment. Perhaps he'd go home to Wales, to the green valleys and wild coasts that he loved. His instincts urged him to seek out clear air, nothing like this dry air conditioning and the close September atmosphere in the streets. He lived too much of his life in cities. Time to go home for a while.

By the time he'd reached Cristos's office, he'd tugged off his tie and loosened the first couple of buttons on his shirt.

Dev crossed through the large, light, open plan office on his way to Cristos' quarters. It didn't look anything like a secret government department, with its large glass windows and ordinary looking cubicles, containing ordinary looking computers and laptops, with ordinary looking people sitting in them.

Tension crackled in the air, a result of so many Talents crammed together. Dev avoided talking to people here, unless he knew them. You never knew who might take offence, and for what reason. Shapeshifters, vampires, anthros, and a highly talented species who called themselves Sorcerers all mingled here for the common good, but the habit of secrecy was so ingrained in them that walking in a place where everyone knew what you were, or could be, was unnerving. Dev felt it himself, the hairs on the back of his neck prickling uncomfortably as he felt the regard of several people he didn't know, but whom his instincts immediately labeled as Talents.

When someone clapped him on the shoulder, he nearly snapped, shifting just enough to rip his attacker's arm off if he had to. His action was instinctive. If he hadn't been here, unsettled by the swirling tensions around him, it would never have happened.

"Hey, man, it's only me." The soft, English accent pierced through his paranoia, and Dev retracted his claws. The man watched the razor sharp, black talons retreat under Dev's human nails without comment.

"Jesus, Laurie, don't do that!"

Laurie chuckled, not at all put out. Since he had at least as much power as Dev and had known him since childhood, he wouldn't be impressed by Dev's defensive action. "What are you doing here, Dev?"

Dev shrugged. "Looking into a PHR cell. I'm conducting an auction next week at Triscombe's, so it seemed like a good idea to combine the two when Cristos asked me. He recognized a piece of jewelry as one belonging to my family and sent me to take a look." He grimaced. "He was right. It's one of ours."

"Considering we don't officially work for them, they keep us busy, don't they?"

Dev grinned. "Sure they do. But we keep them busy, too. If we didn't help them out from time to time, they might have outed us long ago."

"Depends which 'they' you mean. The CIA are pretty genned up, but the FBI hasn't a clue. Doesn't it ever get to you?"

"What?"

Laurie looked away, and Dev knew him well enough to know he avoided meeting his gaze. At his initial, tentative mind probe, he found Laurie's mind shuttered, completely closed. Understandable in this place, where everyone had a degree of Psi ability, and some were so incredibly powerful nobody could resist them.

"All this secrecy stuff. Don't you ever want to shift in front of cameras and say, 'Look, I'm a dragon! So what?' "

The mental image was so good, Dev burst out laughing. Laurie was a soccer player, for one of the best teams in the Premier League and consequently had a high profile career. His, as auctioneer and antiques expert, was bad enough, but Laurie's must be nearly impossible at times. His laughter held a great deal of empathy. "Anything in particular? Want to tell me about it?"

"Nah. Just found a Talent on the streets here. I'm here to do an ad for some men's cologne, but just around the corner from Fifth Avenue, I found this poor girl. She stole my wallet, and when I caught up to her she tried to bite me."

Dev's eyes widened in shock. "A vampire?"

"Yep. Living on her own in the streets. Damned shame. She knew she was a vampire, but she believed all the silver allergy, crucifix and mirror stuff. She thought she was weird because she couldn't change into a bat."

Dev's bark of laughter wasn't echoed by his friend. For centuries, vampires, shapeshifters and all other Talents had wielded a disinformation campaign that was so successful even some of their own kind believed it. It helped them to pass unnoticed in society. After all, if you could see someone's reflection in a mirror, he wasn't a vampire, right?

Wrong. It was the same for shapeshifters. The werewolf legends had been so successful, nobody suspected the truth. No werewolves, no wereleopards, not even wererabbits. Only creatures of myth. He was a wyvern, Laurie was a griffin. Unlike most people, Dev knew that unicorns existed. He'd met one.

He nodded towards the end of the long room. "Been to see the man?"

Laurie nodded. "He's taken the girl in. He'll see she's taught what she needs to know, instead of believing all those urban legends."

"You don't look pleased."

Laurie looked away, and then back at him. "She's really pretty."

A wave of shock swept through Dev. "You can't be serious! Shifters and vampires do not mix, my man. Stick to your own."

Laurie sneered, his lip curling disdainfully. "Isn't that what they tell them in the PHR?"

It was true, but he couldn't help it. Dev tried very hard to tolerate all Talents, but he

wasn't too keen on vampires. An early encounter with a very belligerent member of the species had effectively made him wary for life. He pushed his hair back from his forehead. "Yes, you're right. Vampires are people too." He paused and lowered his voice. "Hey, have you ever thought that Cristos might be a vamp?"

Laurie didn't look half as surprised as he'd expected. "Could be. Who knows? He's careful not to tell anyone what he is. I'm told he's a Sorcerer, from other shifters, and vamps swear he's a shifter. Truth is, nobody knows for sure and he won't tell. He's Talented, his Psi abilities are very strong but that doesn't mean anything. Nobody's seen him shift, nobody's seen him take blood, but that doesn't mean anything, either."

Dev lowered his voice. "I asked him once. He said people not knowing kept him neutral. That way he can run Department Fifty-Seven impartially, and nobody knows for sure so they can't accuse him of favoritism."

Laurie shrugged. "That makes sense." Other departments in other countries weren't so circumspect, but the people who ran the MI6, CIA and Interpol departments were all neutrals; Talents for sure, but what kind, nobody knew. Then there was the company often known just as the Organization, a privately owned security company which networked the world in its attempts to contact Talents and provide what they needed. It was a shame, but some still fell through the net, to the distress of themselves and others.

If hiding shifter abilities from ordinary humans was sometimes a strain, keeping one's true nature from everyone, even other Talents, must be close to unbearable.

Laurie checked his watch, a gold Rolex, typical soccer player attire, expensive and flashy. Dev suspected that was why Laurie had chosen it, as a kind of double bluff. His private life was discreetly expensive, but in public, he could be as blatantly showy as his publicists required. And Dev had reason to know Laurie enjoyed the ironic implications of his public and private personas. One of the most exquisite Rembrandts he'd had the pleasure of handling had gone to Laurie. Small and intimate, the painting wasn't the kind a footballer might be expected to buy. The large, colorful Rubens that he'd come over to New York to sell would be a better bet, but Laurie wasn't interested in that one.

"Got to go, Dev, or I'll lose the deal with the aftershave company."

Dev shook his hand. "I'll look for the ads on TV." Laurie headed for the exit, and Dev continued on his way to Cristos's office.

In the outer office, Cristos's PA waved him through after one glance up from her work. Dev grinned at the sight of her. Diane was an ordinary mortal, but an amazingly efficient worker. What she lacked in Talents she made up for in her appearance. Today her hair was navy and red, striped neatly through her straight, bobbed style. Tomorrow it could well be green.

Cristos was waiting for him. As always, he was immaculate in Armani, not a silver hair out of place. Even in his middle age, he had an air of vitality few of his operatives could emulate and his strong body emanated anything but frailty. He stood up behind his desk and came around to shake Dev's hand. "Good to see you again. How did you go on today?"

No polite chatter, then. Dev took the seat in front of the desk, a relatively comfortable black leather chair. Bookcases lined the long side of the office, some behind glass. The more dangerous books. People who said there was no danger in books were either stupid or ignorant.

Cristos leaned over to a small table behind him and took a pot of coffee from a stand, pouring them both a cup after raising a silver eyebrow and receiving a nod in return. He

pushed the cream and sugar across the clear expanse of his desk. Dev took his coffee black so he ignored them.

"I went and met the Lancasters. The brother is an active member of the PHR, I'm sure of it. I don't think Alixandra Lancaster is actively involved." He didn't want to think of that lovely woman involved in such a filthy business. It hurt him to think of it, but he'd seen the information. Dev had seen the list of this cell and hated Alix Lancaster's name being there. But it had been.

"What makes you so sure?"

"She has a Talent. I don't know what it is. I communicated with her telepathically and she replied, once. She's scared to death. It's bound to distance her from people who want to see all Talents eliminated, like the PHR." He grimaced. "Clay Lancaster refused to allow me to buy the pendant right away and invited me to dinner with them. I took the bait."

Cristos took a sip of his coffee. "You saw the medallion?"

Dev grunted. "I saw it. It's a jewel of power."

"You don't say?" Cristos sounded as if Dev was merely discussing the weather. "What, in your opinion, does that mean? Jewels of power come in many forms."

"It holds a drop of blood from one of my people. It can be used to control or turn us to the dark side, although it was first designed as a healing jewel. I don't know if the Lancasters know the words of power to activate it." He stared across the desk at Cristos. "Interested now?"

Cristos visibly shuddered. "Definitely. You are rather intimidating in your other form. I don't like to think of you gone bad. That jewel could turn you, couldn't it?"

Dev nodded. "You've seen us?" Shapeshifters didn't advertise their presence very often. Not many outside their community saw them shift any more and when they did, they usually kept their other form deliberately small to avoid unwanted attention. In his other form, he measured about twenty feet, nose to tail, but he rarely had the luxury of retaining that size for long.

"Yes, I've seen a few shapeshifters change their form. I've seen many things, but not everything. Not yet."

Dev watched Cristos sip his coffee. The man had an invisible barrier, protecting him from any probe, however skilled. He was an enigma. No-one knew what drove him. He adamantly refused to admit he had any Talents at all, much less admit what form his Talent took. His role was to remain neutral. So nobody asked, although speculation was rife in all communities.

The recollection of Alix's lovely face crossed his mind as he mentally relived the encounter earlier in the day. "I don't know if the sister is involved in the PHR any more," Dev said, and instantly realized his mistake. He could have bitten his tongue out.

Cristos fixed him with his cool, grey gaze. "You like her."

Dev shrugged. "I wouldn't go that far. She's attractive, and seducing her wouldn't be a hardship." She was a peach. A ripe peach. Under the severely cut blouse and navy skirt, her curves beckoned him to touch, to taste. Something Dev badly wanted to do.

"You would. I've seen her picture. She dresses poorly but underneath, she's a beauty. Not your usual type though, Dev."

Dev grimaced at this reminder of what he liked to do in his spare time. "Is it my fault I like women? Believe it or not, some are just friends." His playboy image was greatly exaggerated, but he couldn't deny he liked the company of women. And he didn't like to

sleep alone.

Cristos bared his teeth briefly in a parody of a smile. "I believe you. There wouldn't be time to do your job if you really did all you're accused of in the press."

Forced to laugh, Dev said; "The pragmatic approach. Quite right. It's just that I was labeled in my youth and the reputation tends to follow me. This youth, that is." For this lifetime, Dev had decided to skim through, not getting involved with anyone. So far, it was working well, and he was never short of female company. "Yes, I thought Miss Lancaster was very attractive, and yes, I would have taken her out to dinner had her brother not asked me first. A shame I have to mix business and pleasure but I have to know if they're a threat to my people. It doesn't mean I can't have my playtime, if the lady is willing."

The only sound in the room was the click of china against china when Cristos replaced his cup in the saucer. "They want you."

"I know they do."

Cristos rested his elbows on the desk and steepled his hands, the index fingers just touching the tip of his nose. "May I read you? See what you saw?"

He was asking for access to Dev's mind. Dev nodded. Cristos stared at Dev for a full minute. Dev met his regard, and allowed him in. He shared the scene, re-running it in the forefront of his mind, allowing the Deputy Director to share the experience with him.

"You can't go." There was no room for argument, but Dev decided to argue.

"I'm going. I can handle this."

"They'll be waiting for you."

He shook his head. "They'll be waiting with the traps they think will take me down, but I can handle silver bullets and I will probably be able to persuade them out of it before they get that far. I have to face them, Cristos, otherwise they'll come after me until they get me. If I persuade them I'm harmless, then I'll be a lot safer."

"We'll send somebody else. They can get the job done."

Dev considered the problem. The way it was set up, they couldn't send anyone else. "I don't think so. And I want to know more about the woman. She's Talented and she's alone. That's a terrible burden to bear. I want to know whose side she's on. I want her out of there and given some idea of how she can control what she does." Perhaps she would act as a spy, but it didn't matter. If she didn't acknowledge and learn to control her Talent, whatever it was, eventually she'd collapse under the strain. While he didn't want to get involved, he couldn't turn his back on the situation. Alix Lancaster needed his help. "Was she always part of the PHR?"

"Her parents were, her brother is. When the Perfect Human Race started, we ignored it. Another fanatical purist organization, the problem of the FBI, not us. Nobody realized how dangerous they were getting. This is the land of free speech, and they're entitled to their opinions, but when they moved into violence, we had to take notice. Now they've killed law abiding citizens and the FBI has proof it was this cell, though they think the shape-shifting pictures were faked to get the publicity. We have to take them out, or the FBI will." Cristos grimaced. "The last time they tried that, it turned into a massacre and an embarrassing fiasco. We can do better than that."

"Take them out?" A sharp warning sparked in Dev's brain. This was the CIA, after all. They took people out. Eliminated them. Killed them. More reasons to contact Alix and get her away from the danger zone, before the shooting started. He wanted to believe in her innocence, but if he was wrong and she was involved in the murders of the dragon and his mate, he would have no compunction in turning her over to the authorities. If she

was innocent, he could offer her sanctuary while the other members of the cell were taken care of. There was no doubt which of those two eventualities he preferred. He badly wanted her to be innocent, so badly that the intensity of the emotion disturbed him. Dev tried not to let too much get into his deepest core, these days. Too many years, too many hurts had marked him.

"If necessary. Most we can bring in, and question. Get any of them into the sights of a strong Sorcerer and they don't stand a chance."

Even Dev, with his powerful Psi powers, was in awe of the Sorcerers. Their mental abilities were beyond compare. "Why don't you send Sorcerers in, then?"

"We do. All the time, but I want to know about the Lancasters, and you need that jewel back." He sighed and picked up his spoon, turning it in his fingers, the light of the late afternoon sun glinting sharply off the polished silver. "I don't know if we're winning, but we can't give up. These people want to eliminate everyone who has any Talent at all, together with any ordinary citizens who get in their way. We're mongrels to them, deviants, they call us. They want to destroy us all. The only reason they keep their captives alive is to get information about friends and family."

"As if the scientists weren't enough!" Dev had come across the scientists before, and they seemed to be stronger in Europe than they were in the States, where the PHR reigned supreme. They wanted to experiment on the Talented, discover just what made them so different and exploit it for their own use. To his people, neither was an option. The only reason many of his kind joined the covert Government organizations was to ensure neither the scientists nor the PHR gained a foothold in power. Nor governments, for that matter.

He'd faced death before, more than once. He'd face it again. What he wouldn't do was walk away from a problem. "I still want to bring her out if she's free of implication in the murders. Give her a chance."

The Deputy Director straightened in his chair, his demeanor almost aristocratic. "Listen, Wyvern. Here in the States the PHR has grown at an alarming rate for the past five years. They're recruiting everywhere, telling people about us, inciting hatred. Apart from the danger to everyone here, there's danger to your people if they take you. You'll take all that information with you. You can't help it because it's part of you. All they have to do is capture you and keep you until the full moon. You'll have to shift then, and they'll have their proof. What do you think they'll do then?"

Dev knew the answer. "Take their proof to Congress?"

"I wouldn't be in the least surprised."

Exposure. More than most Dev had reason to know society wasn't ready for that. Not yet. He met Cristos's gaze steadily. "You can't stop me going to dinner at the Lancaster's tonight."

"I can." Cristos's mouth firmed into a thin line.

"Not legally. I'm only a consultant here. I'm not one of your operatives."

Cristos tilted his head on one side. "You're right. I can't stop you-legally." His stress on the last word made it obvious he wasn't considering legal methods.

"I want that pendant, and I want to know more about Alixandra Lancaster." Dev saw no reason to become agitated. He would do what he thought was right, as he always did. He might fail, but before he had to shift, he would kill himself if he couldn't get away. There was one more way. A drug called cephalox, addictive and dangerous, could stop a shapeshifter changing his form. He'd taken it once before. If he could hide a supply about himself, he would take it again. "There are two weeks to the full moon. If I take an

electronic trace, you can find me long before I have to shift."

"That's a possibility. Would you agree to a skin trace?"

"Pardon me?"

Cristos leaned back and lifted the jug of coffee again, but Dev refused. "You Americans drink coffee at a rate that sets me jumping. I can't handle that many cups in one day."

"Would you like tea?"

"I'm fine as I am, thank you."

A smile twisted the older man's lips. "So English! Do you drink tea all the time at MI6?"

Dev laughed. "How would I know? I'm not an operative, just a consultant, the same as here. And I'm not English, I'm Welsh. What's a skin trace?" If he'd hoped to take Cristos off guard by his abrupt reversion to the earlier topic, he was disappointed.

Cristos leaned back, his leather chair creaking a little. "Our experts are developing subcutaneous implants to improve communication in the field. We can implant a small pellet just under your skin on your wrist, which can act as a beacon. We'll be able to track your movements and send a team in to retrieve you. All electronic, nothing Psi about it. Just as a backup."

"Could I turn it off?"

Cristos grinned. "Yes. But only you. You use your abilities to switch it on and off. Agents in the field don't have that luxury. You can cut it out yourself in an emergency."

"I suppose vampires can tear it out with their teeth," Dev remarked laconically.

That startled a bark of laughter from Cristos. "The day we persuade a vampire to wear one is the day I streak through the main office buck naked."

Dev joined in the laughter. The few vampires he'd met had been solitary, dark beings, more secretive than his kind. But shapeshifters weren't known for their gregariousness, either. Not that he minded, as long as he could remove the thing once he'd done. "So I can go if I wear one of those devices?"

"I still don't like it, but you'll go anyway, won't you? I'd rather you had some kind of backup." Cristos got to his feet, moving towards the door, but before he opened it, he turned back. "But for God's sake be careful. I don't want to lose you, Dev. If you manage to get the girl away, let me know. You know better than to bring her here without permission, but you can stash her at a safe house or a hotel until we've checked her out."

Dev nodded. "I'll be in touch."

Chapter Two

"Do you think this will do?" Feeling more nervous than she had for her Prom, Alix smoothed her hands over the slightly flared deep pink skirt she'd chosen to wear. She didn't want to be too obvious, but this skirt and the matching top were elegant without being obvious.

"You look fine," Clay soothed. "We'll be fine. All you have to do is read him, then we'll take him, if we have to." He glanced around the apartment. "We'll try not to break anything. I know how you love this place."

"Not the apartment, but the things in it." When they had moved to New York from the country, they had been lucky to find an apartment big enough so they could keep some of the furniture from the farmhouse their parents had owned. "I'd hate to lose some of the stuff we have here."

A small hallway, with doors either side leading to their bedrooms and bathrooms led into a large living room, where much of the furniture, books and pictures from their childhood home fitted well. A small dining room and kitchen on one side of the living room and a study and den on the other completed what was, by urban standards, a reasonably large apartment. Which was why Clay and Alix lived together, still. On her own she couldn't have afforded anything like this, and neither could he have done.

Alix walked into the kitchen and stirred the goulash. It was one of her sure-fire recipes, and she'd prepared a large salad as well, in case their guest was a vegetarian. Nerves sizzled through her. She knew she shouldn't be feeling like this about someone she'd met a matter of a few hours ago, but she'd been drawn to him as to few other men she'd ever met.

Clay wandered up behind her. "You can read him, then we'll decide what to do."

"You won't take him away tonight?"

"No." That response was too quick, too pat. Right then Alix suspected Clay was up to something. Something he wasn't telling her. He'd planned something with Steve. If she identified Deverell Wyvern as Psi, they'd take him tonight, perhaps even kill him.

"There's something else, something that will confirm whether he's a Deviant or not." Clay shoved his hands in his pockets, and jingled his change. Here it comes, she thought. "He has a tattoo somewhere on his body. When he gets excited, angry or worked up, it glows."

"We won't be able to see it, will we?"

"We might."

Alix dropped the spoon on the work surface and faced him, hands on hips. "And how do you propose we spot the tattoo?"

Clay grinned sheepishly. "You could try kissing him a time or two. The mark will heat up and you'll be able to feel it."

For a moment, Alix was stunned, but her voice returned quickly. "You think this man is a Deviant, one of those incredibly dangerous beings you want to destroy and you want me to *kiss him*?" She could hardly believe what she was hearing. What did it say about Clay's consideration for her?

Clay's grin eased into a conciliatory smile. "Hey, babe, I'm with you, I don't think he's one, either. This'll just be dinner with a man you like, and a chance to sell those paintings we haven't any room for."

Alix wasn't afraid of Deverell's ability. Plenty of people had the power of telepathy, whether they knew it or not. He knew it, too. Perhaps it was just something like her own gift, dormant, not important to her everyday life. Claiming these people were vampires or shape-shifters was just the PHR's imagination getting out of control.

"Tell you what." Clay spoke as though he'd only just thought of it. "You read him, then I'll get Steve to call me and I'll leave the two of you alone. If you say the word 'serpent' that's our key, that means he's nothing for the PHR to worry about. How 'bout that?"

She thought it over. Yes, if she read him and he was what they suspected, a shapeshifter, she could give Clay the word to leave and get rid of him, perhaps warn Deverell of the danger. She had an agreement with Clay; they had a key word to give the other the hint to leave, if they wanted some privacy. Last time, Clay had used the apartment and she'd spent the evening with a girlfriend in town. The last time she'd used it had been with her last regular boyfriend. It was more than her turn.

She stuck out her hand. "Deal." They shook on it, grinning.

Clay's naturally protective attitude towards Alix had been a problem as she'd grown up, so this was a step forward for him, to trust her to handle the situation. "I've checked him out, and there's nothing in the reports to say Deverell Wyvern is anything but a London based antiques expert and man about town."

"I've seen the pictures. He takes out a lot of beautiful women, doesn't he?"

Clay winked. "He probably stays in with them, too."

Alix was nothing like those willowy model types Deverell Wyvern seemed to prefer. Not that she cared.

Who was she kidding? Of course she cared.

Ten minutes later, the doorbell rang and Clay answered it. Alix went through to the living room to greet him.

Wyvern was dressed more casually than when she'd seen him earlier. Dark trousers, a pale blue polo shirt and a leather jacket did nothing to detract from his appeal. He looked just as gorgeous as he had in his business suit. Resisting the insane temptation to run her fingers through his loosely tousled dark hair, to feel its texture in her hands, she smiled and shook his hand, forcing herself to release it quickly. His touch sent a shudder through her. "I brought a bottle of wine. I hope it goes with the meal." The deep timbre of his voice shivered through her senses.

"Th-thank you. I'm sure it will." Glancing at the bottle, she noticed it was something French, probably expensive. She took it through to the kitchen to open it, shoving the cork back in her own, more modest offering. Two bottles wouldn't be advisable, the way she felt. Alcohol always tended to loose her inhibitions, and she wanted to hold on to them for the time being. She needed to.

She picked up two glasses, and took them with the bottle, through to the small dining room. She had made up for the lack of size in the room by making it elegantly comfortable, with dark colors and mood lighting to enhance the atmosphere.

"This is nice. I like your taste. So un-Martha!"

She hadn't heard him come in and she jumped, nearly dropping the wine on the crisply laundered tablecloth. He reached forward and caught the bottle, but so did she and their hands touched. For the second time she felt that connection, arcing between them. She forced a smile. "Thank you." Carefully putting the wine down, she turned to face him.

Clay followed behind. "This apartment was only meant to be temporary, but we

both like it and it's large enough for two."

She smiled. "Please, take a seat and I'll bring the first course through."

Deverell stayed on his feet until she returned, holding her chair back for her after she'd deposited the plates on the table.

"I suppose, being English, you live in a castle or something?" She cursed inwardly. That sounded so stupid!

He laughed, a full bodied, joyful kind of laugh. "Why do Americans always think the British either live in castles or cottages? Wrong on both counts. I'm not English, I'm Welsh, and I've never lived in a castle, although I believe some of my ancestors did. I have a small flat in town and a house in the Brecon Beacons." The slight roll of his 'r's when he mentioned his homeland gave an added allure to the words.

"Welsh? Then you're a Celt?" She concentrated, and opened her mind to his, trying to read him. Nothing.

"People call us Black Welsh. The Celts didn't only live in Scotland and Wales, you know. They also filled Cornwall and Wales. In any case, although I have the coloring, I'm too tall for a Celt. They were supposed to be a short race, except for a very few in Scotland, and that's probably the Viking in them, rather than the Celt."

She'd tried to contact him, opened herself to him, but he hadn't replied. She couldn't read anything in his mind, nothing past a friendly warmth and mild curiosity, neither emotion out of place for him here.

Clay watched her between bites, waiting for her to say something. The tension in the small room increased, not entirely covered by the light conversation they made. Alix had had enough. Time to give Clay a chance to leave. "Isn't Wales the place St. Patrick rid of serpents?"

Clay didn't even flinch.

"That's Ireland, though some people think St. Patrick came from Wales as a child." He paused to chew a bite of salad. "I like this. A good tang to the dressing. Is there lemon juice in it?"

"Among other things." She wasn't about to give him her secret recipe. "I make it myself. I have to watch my weight, but that doesn't mean I have to starve."

He put down his fork, and looked genuinely surprised, his dark eyebrows lifting above the rim of his eyeglasses. "Have you got this New York disease, wanting to be as thin as a rake? I prefer to see a woman who isn't ashamed of her curves. Most of all I prefer to see a woman happy, and food plays a large part in that."

She couldn't believe him, not after the research she'd done into his background and the pictures she'd seen. "Is that why you prefer to take out models?"

He laughed again, shortly. "They only take my picture when I'm out with a model or an actress or someone like that. I freely admit I like the company of women, but it's not only for their looks. I'm not news, but sometimes I escort the newsworthy."

Clay put in a word. "You're a man about town, or so they say."

"I'm just a man." He wasn't laughing this time. "It sounds stupid, but some of my best friends are women. Most are friends." He leaned back, his salad almost finished. Just a few shreds of lettuce curled on his plate.

When his cell phone rang, Clay pulled it out of his pocket and frowned. "I'm sorry, I should have turned this off before dinner but I ought to take this call. Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

Clay pushed back his chair, got up and went into the living room, closing the door

behind him.

Dev smiled at Alix wolfishly, just exaggerated enough to make her smile. "Aren't you afraid to be alone with me, a man with a reputation like mine?" Despite his teasing tones, there was truth in his words.

With a slight shock, she realized she wasn't. She felt easy in his company, as with few other people, even though she knew he must at least suspect her secret. She would enjoy the hour or so she could spend with him before she sent him home. Perhaps she would kiss him, as Clay had suggested. "I don't think you're into forcing yourself on to anyone."

"Would I have to force myself on you?"

The air around them stilled. She couldn't think of a good answer. If she answered the truth that amounted to an invitation but if she said yes that would be a blatant lie, and he'd probably know it.

She got to her feet and picked up the plates without answering his provocative question. He stood too, and held the door open for her, following her into the kitchen. "May I help with anything?"

"Thanks." She didn't look at him, not wanting him to see her confusion. How could he unnerve her like this? She'd locked away all her fears and concerns long ago. Not even Clay knew them all. So how could this man get under her skin so effectively?

Clay came into the kitchen while Alix was busy dishing the rice and goulash. "Listen, I'm real sorry about this, but I should go. Steve has a problem. His grandmother's taken a fall. The paramedics say she hasn't broken anything, but they want to take her in for some tests. His car's in the garage getting the brakes fixed, and he needs a lift back when they're done."

Steve's grandmothers had both died years ago, but Alix tried to look concerned. "Oh, Clay, you should go!"

Out of sight of Dev Wyvern, Clay winked at her. "Will you be okay?"

"Sure."

"Should I go?" Dev Wyvern headed for the door. He should, he really should. It would keep him out of Clay's way, in case there was more there than she'd found. But she didn't want him to. Alix knew Dev liked her, felt his warm regard, and she certainly wanted to know him a little better.

Clay replied for her. "No, man, you stay, unless you have to be somewhere. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Dev glanced at Alix. "Yes, please stay." She smiled, and he took a step towards her.

Clay's attention went from one to the other and his smile was knowing. Alix hated it, but it was part of having a brother. No doubt he'd tease her about her attraction to the art dealer later, once he'd put off Steve and stood his troops down. "I'll get going, then." A few minutes later the front door slammed. Alix was alone with Dev Wyvern.

He sniffed the air appreciatively when she lifted the lid of the pan. "You really are a good cook." He crooked a brow at her, a one sided smile making him even more attractive. "Don't disappoint me and say you bought all this in, or your brother cooked it all."

Someone ought to bottle that smile and sell it. They'd make a fortune. "Clay cooks well, but I did it tonight."

She finished dishing out the food and took the plates. He went ahead and opened the door for her.

They retook their seats, and he leaned over to pour out the wine. A waft of his

cologne teased her senses. A light, citrus scent, spiced with him. But he wasn't flirting, he was talking to her, making conversation. She tried to respond, discussing New York in September, answering his questions about the new shows opening on and off Broadway.

He took a bite of the goulash and fell silent, closing his eyes while he chewed. After he cleared his mouth, he regarded at her with what looked like adoration, his green eyes glazed over blissfully. "That," he declared, "is wonderful."

"Thank you." He really meant it, it wasn't a come-on line. "My grandmother was Hungarian, or so Clay always told me. I never knew her. Perhaps it's in the genes."

He scooped up another forkful, and studied her while he ate. The close regard from those moss green eyes made her shift in her seat before turning to her own food. His eyes grew less worshipful, more speculative, but he didn't speak until he'd consumed several more mouthfuls.

"Hungarian? That would account for your dark eyes and hair. I'd somehow thought it was partly native American, something like that. Gypsy?"

She laughed, more to break the tension than anything else. "Not every Hungarian is a gypsy, any more than every Englishman lives in a castle. No, my grandmother came from an old established family, I think one of her ancestors was even a King. The Nadasdys. That's all I know, my parents never talked about her. Only Clay."

He let out a long sigh, dropping his lids over his eyes so she couldn't see his reaction. "I see. Interesting. Did you inherit anything other than this delicious recipe?" He lifted his eyes to hers again, the speculation in his gaze sharpened. This meant something to him. What significance could her Hungarian ancestors have?

She shrugged. "A few more recipes and some stories. Grandmother came over here after the '56 uprising in Hungary, when the Communists moved in, and from the stories she told Clay, it wasn't pleasant."

"No, it wasn't." He paused to take a sip of his wine. "I studied it at school, but I can't say I remember many details. The pictures have stayed with me, though." His mouth settled in a grim line, before relaxing when he looked at her again. He had the most inviting mouth, a little full for a man, but all too easily she could imagine them taking her to ecstasy.

"Where did you go to school?" She really had to get her mind out of the gutter. She was supposed to be discovering all she could about him, not drooling over his mouth, and the message she imagined she read in his eyes.

He chuckled. "You want to get to know me better?"

"That sounds like a pickup line." To stop looking at him, she lifted her glass and took a deep swallow. It was very good wine, and if she wasn't mistaken, very potent, too.

"It can be if you want it to be."

She choked on the wine, her eyes watering. She heard rather than saw him rise from his place and come around the table to her, rubbing her back. The contact was electric, even though it was through layers of clothing, sending tingles of awareness right through her body. Resisting the urge to lean back, like a besotted cat, she shook her head. "I'm all right now."

His hand moved up, under her hair, caressing her neck in light strokes. "Why fight it? If I'm not mistaken there's a mutual attraction going on here." He lifted his hand away after one last gentle, caressing touch. "I'm not wrong, am I?"

What could she say but the truth? "No, you're not wrong, but I make it a rule to know a man more than a few hours before I leap into bed with him."

He laughed, a deep chuckle, and returned to his place at the table, sliding into his seat with a gentle hiss of wool against leather. Even this incidental sound had her nerves prickling. "You want to know me better. Ask me something."

"So tell me about the girlfriends." Hearing about him with other women should help calm her down. At least she hoped so.

He cocked an eyebrow. "The truth or what the papers report?" He forked up another mouthful of goulash, and stared regretfully at his nearly empty plate. He lifted his gaze to her and again fixed her with his bright stare. "I was a Deb's Delight." His grin widened when he saw her frown. "That means I escorted debutantes to social functions. There's officially no London season any more, no need for it, but there's still a social round of charity balls, fashion shows, dinners, gallery openings, that kind of thing. And the girls want escorts, a safe pair of hands, someone they know won't use the wrong fork. My father knew their father, that kind of thing. I fitted the bill and I owned a dinner jacket. I've been out with all kinds, industrialists' daughters, film stars, models, but once you're known as a good escort, they pass you around."

"It sounds sordid." She was right to talk about this. Deverell Wyvern didn't sound like the kind of man she wanted to get to know any better, despite his devastating good looks.

"It's more like going out with friends. Oh don't get me wrong, I've had girlfriends in the past, but I tend to have them one at a time. And not nearly as many as the media supposes." He paused. "Alix, because I've been seen and photographed with reputedly beautiful women doesn't mean I can't appreciate true beauty when I see it."

Her first instinct was to disbelieve the sincerity, scoff at the admiration she saw in his eyes. Images of the women he'd been with flashed up in her mind, pictures taken by the world's paparazzi. Beautiful women. Not her. How could she compare with those? Alix was dowdy and overweight, nobody had ever said she was anything but average, and she'd only had three boyfriends in her entire life. But then, most of her life had been spent in a small, enclosed community. Only recently had she begun to experience life in a big city.

He took the last mouthful from his plate, then looked up hopefully, like a lapdog after a tidbit.

His expression was so at odds with his rakish, slightly dangerous air, Alix couldn't help laughing and the tension between them eased with her laughter. "Give me your plate."

He handed it over and she took it into the kitchen to scoop out more goulash and rice for him. She found his unashamed appetite endearing, but each revelation made her see him more in perspective. He'd hardly take any interest in her, any real interest. She didn't know whether to be glad or sorry from that revelation, but it would be hypocritical to deny she found him desirable. She would just be another notch in his bedpost. For all his friendliness, she had never read of him staying any length of time with one woman.

She went back into the dining room and put the plate in front of him, moving immediately to her own place at the other side of the table. He'd refilled her glass, so she picked it up and took a sip. "Why did you go into the auction business?"

He picked up his fork after she sat down. "Because I loved it, but it didn't pay well at first. When I finished school, I went straight into the auction house. I started as a porter. The Deb's Delight doesn't only get his name in the papers, he gets fed. I know which one of those mattered to me most at the time."

"What does a porter do?"

"What does a porter ever do? He fetches and carries the pieces being sold." That must be where he built up his body. Dev was lean, but not puny. His shoulders were broad and the polo shirt he wore occasionally touched his skin, resting against the powerful muscles of his chest. "It's entry level in an auction house for many who go on to be curators and directors. There's nothing like it for hands-on experience. I learned what I liked and what I loved, but I lived on the breadline for a few years. So some of the girls I knew took pity on me and asked me to escort them. I got to eat and socialize, meet the people I might be selling to in the future, and all for the price of a dinner jacket." He chuckled. "That jacket saw a lot of action!"

Ah, here we go. A glorified gigolo.

He looked up, frowning in displeasure, as if he'd heard her very private thoughts. That was impossible, she'd blocked them too well. Her gift made her acutely aware of other individuals with the same gift and so far she'd felt no probe from him, no attempt to communicate with her.

"Some of the girls were more to me than meal tickets, but I was never less than honest, and I wasn't alone, either. There was a veritable army of us. We were just convenient to have around."

Yeah, right. He must know how attractive he was. His picture in a newspaper would sell a few copies, even without a story. "Wasn't it glamorous?" Her curiosity was piqued.

"Sometimes, of course it was. First nights were especially glam. But I didn't like it after a time. It's all about being in the right places, and with the right people." He was hiding something. She felt a reticence about him, something he wasn't telling her.

Her interest sharpened. "And you're 'right people'?"

He shrugged, and paused to eat another mouthful. "Some would say so. My family's good, my father came from aristocracy. That's why I want the pendant. It's my family crest, exactly the w-dragon on the crest."

"W-dragon?" A smile played around her mouth. Alix had finished her meal, and now toyed with her wine glass, taking small sips. This was her third glass and she was definitely feeling the effects. She had to keep her wits about her. His revelations were making him more attractive, not less, and she wasn't sure she was entirely sorry. After all, where was the harm? She deserved some fun didn't she? Perhaps those telepathic communications were her imagination working overtime. She hadn't picked up a thing from him this evening.

"Wyvern." He put down his fork and picked up his glass. "A wyvern is a kind of dragon, usually black, sometimes white. A Welsh dragon with a barbed tail. Just like that pendant. The background is the same as on the family crest, too, so I suspect it belonged to somebody in the family once. It's the perfect gift for my mother, so I hope you can sell it to me."

She watched him, taking another sip of her wine as an excuse not to reply, to give herself a moment to think. Perhaps it was a simple family jewel, after all and he really did just want it because it showed his family crest. "We do want those paintings examined, but we're not sure they're worth anything at all, so we thought a quid pro quo would be useful to both sides."

"Shall we get the business part over with?" he said with one of his charming smiles, leaning back in his chair. "My top price for the pendant is two thousand dollars, fifteen hundred if I assess the paintings for you. I won't pay any more. I think that's overpriced,

but I'll pay that to make my mother happy. And to make you happy." The smile turned more intimate, disturbingly inviting, but still he kept his mind firmly shuttered.

"I'll tell my brother. We always make business decisions together." Not quite true, but she made sure they made the important decisions together. Clay still tended towards the alpha. It had taken a few blazing rows for him to get the message.

Idly swirling the wine in his glass, Dev shot Alix a smoldering look. "I'm enjoying this, and I can't help but feel your brother wouldn't like the way my thoughts are going."

"I'm my own person," she declared, realizing too late that was a subtle invitation for him to continue. What did it hurt? She liked him. It would lead to a few kisses when she waved him goodbye at the door that was all. She looked forward to them.

Remembering her purpose tonight, she went into the kitchen to find the other bottle of wine. It was only when she turned around she saw he'd followed her. "I have dessert."

"I couldn't eat another thing," he confessed. "That goulash was spectacularly good. Do you feel in need of-dessert?" He eyed her, blatantly discussing more than dessert, inviting a response.

She refused to give it. "I don't eat dessert very often. I'm watching my weight."

"I'd like to watch your weight. It seems to me it would be a very rewarding thing to do."

A shiver went down her spine. He stood so close to her, it would have been easy to take that step towards him, let him hold her and do what he wanted. But it was too early in the evening to initiate something that would escalate beyond her control. Kisses at the door, she reminded herself. That she could handle. Then she would have to say goodbye to one of the most fascinating men she'd ever met. For his own good. After tonight, she had to keep him away from her and from the PHR.

"Shall we go into the living room?"

"Would you like a hand clearing up?"

She hadn't expected that from a male social butterfly. She was less sure of that now, but for her own sanity, she clung to the illusion, stubbornly refusing to fall under his spell. Turning to him, she smiled brightly. "There's no need. That's the pleasure in having a separate dining room. I'll clear up later, it won't take long." *When you've gone*, was the implication she hoped she gave.

He smiled ruefully. "I get the message. You have something you wanted to show me?"

Shock hit her for an instant before she remembered. She'd almost forgotten, she'd been so intent in fighting down the desire to give in to this sinfully handsome man. The paintings. "Yes, I pulled the paintings out of storage and put them in the living room."

She led the way to the small table in the corner of the living room where the paintings were stacked. He lifted the first one on to the cloth she'd put over the table to protect it. It was an oil painting of a grotesquely distorted pig, with an enormous body and tiny snout. She hated it.

He smiled. "Are they all like this?"

"All but one."

"Naïve paintings of farmyard stock are doing very well these days." He reached into his pants pocket and drew out his loupe, flicking it open without watching what he was doing. "If you were thinking of selling, now's a good time to do it."

He leaned over the painting, his eyeglasses glinting in the dim light. "I'm sorry to destroy the atmosphere, but have you a bright light I can use?"

She'd thought of that. Reaching over him, she clicked on the table lamp, which was fitted with a bright daylight bulb. When she drew back, although she was careful, she touched his shoulder.

The contact thrilled her and the thought, unbidden, of what it would feel like to have his skin along hers, all of his length against her naked body. She shuddered.

"I felt it too," he murmured, although he didn't move, continuing to study the painting. Alix took a step back, away from his warmth.

He probably took more time than he needed, perhaps waiting for a response from her. The next two paintings were like the first, naïve renderings of farmyard animals.

Alix tried to keep her voice steady. "I hate them. They give me the creeps."

"Some people love them." He paused and glanced around. One small painting hanging on the wall attracted his attention and he stepped forward for a closer look. "Well what have we here?" he murmured, his voice sharpened with interest. "May I?" When she nodded her permission, he lifted the painting off the wall and laid it on the table, bending over to study it in more detail. He straightened and collided with her, standing too close next to him. Automatically, he put his arms around her to steady her, but continued to stare at the painting.

It showed a Dutch interior. A woman in a large, white cap stood with her back to the onlooker, and two men smiled at her, cards in their hands. They sat at a table littered with objects; a carafe, a bowl of fruit. The floor was black and white tiles. At least, the cap and tiles had been white once, but the little oil was filthy, grimed with the wood smoke of many years.

She'd always liked the painting, and meant to have it cleaned, but cleaning was expensive. "I know it's a genre painting, but I don't know if it's the real Dutch thing or a copy."

"If it's real, you should be able to buy another shop." He seemed unaware of his arms still around her, though she was not. It felt good, so good she wanted to sink into him, put her arms around him, too, but they hung at her sides. Alix wasn't sure if she should move away or stay where she was. She wanted—oh, how she wanted! —to stay there, but she couldn't, shouldn't.

"It could be a number of things. May I take it away to Triscombe's? I'll give you a receipt and get some people to analyzing it."

"It's filthy. How can you tell anything from it the state it's in? We don't want to get it cleaned and restored if it's worth nothing."

He devoured the little painting with his eyes, analyzing, studying. "You'd be surprised what we can tell. We'll get it out of its frame, and see what that shows us. Sometimes there are notes inside, provenances, and there'll be a small area that was covered by the frame. We'll be able to see the colors. If it's genuine, you should have it cleaned professionally, and we can give you an insurance value, or you can sell it. But I'd like to have a good look at it before I give you a final decision."

"Is it really valuable?"

"Possibly." The caressing tone had gone from his voice, replaced by sharp analysis. "But don't get your hopes up, not yet. It could be a painted-over photograph. Amateur artists did that, so did forgers. It could be a copy, a forgery or a late pastiche. It will be worth something, but it could range from around a hundred dollars to—thousands. It's impossible to tell, yet."

Abruptly, he turned his head to look at her. She met his gaze fearlessly. Behind the

glasses, his eyes were beautiful-green, flecked with gold and brown, changeable, she guessed, depending on the light. Now they seemed hot, charged with fire.

The next step seemed inevitable. He kissed her.

His lips felt soft on her own, demanding a response, which she gave without thinking. Opening her mouth a little made him sigh and open his own, widening the access so he could plunge his tongue inside.

Before she realized what she was doing, her arms went around him and she held on. The ride was amazing. He made a slight noise of appreciation in the back of his throat that reverberated through her, holding her captive, increasing the frantically rising desire that surged up, taking her well beyond control in an instant.

There was nothing leisurely about the way he took her, held her tightly while he explored her mouth. Everything he did concentrated there. He held her, but his hands were immobile on her body, as hers were on his.

It was so much more than she'd been expecting. The connection was overwhelming, impossible to ignore, her libido rising up like a caged tiger, battering against the fragile bars of its cage.

Eventually he tore his mouth away from hers, but didn't let her go. He regarded her through half-closed eyes, gleaming with slumberous passion. "There are two ways this can go. I can give you a receipt, call a cab and take those paintings with me when I leave, or you can show me where you sleep." He paused, and she watched him, every moment falling deeper into his seductive gaze. "You choose."

Recklessly, Alix threw all her good intentions out the window. It was early, Clay wouldn't be back for hours. There'd be time to get Deverell clear away before her brother got home. She could have this, once, this man she wanted so much. Only once, she reminded herself. "Which one would you prefer?"

"If you have to ask that, I'm not doing a very good job of persuading you. But you have to make up your mind. Now." He didn't try to hide his erection, now pressing against her belly. It did more than anything else to persuade her. He wanted her, no lie, and it had been so long since she'd felt the intimacy. She yearned for that feeling again, especially from Dev Wyvern.

She took a sharp breath, but didn't move away from him. There was no choice, really. She hadn't probed him yet, hadn't felt his instinctive mental barrier waver at all, so she needed to get him more relaxed.

It didn't take a second for her to realize that was a crock. She wanted him, pure and simple.

"I don't do this."

"Believe it or not, neither do I, not nearly as much as you'd think." He bent and placed a kiss on the tip of her nose. "But I want to now. How about you?"

"Yes." She breathed the word, and with it, felt any remaining resistance slip away. "Come with me." She slid out of his arms but took his hand, leading him out the living room towards the small hall. Her bedroom was on the left hand side. Once through the door, he took her mouth again. The door clicked shut behind his back, and he leaned against it, dragging her close.

His hands weren't still now. They roved over her back, learning her clothing, stilling over her bra. With a deft twist of his fingers, she felt the clasp go, and the garment loosened over her breasts. He swallowed her gasp of surprise with his lips, closing over hers to resume where they'd left off in the lounge.

She felt possessed, cared for, wanted, all at once and she loved it. She could allow herself this illusion as long as she remembered that was what it was; an illusion. And she wanted to know what it was like to be loved by an expert.

And was he an expert! Apart from the trick with the bra, his hands moved slowly over her, nothing violent, nothing hard, just arousing. In another man it would have felt like the octopus syndrome; when a man wanted his hands everywhere, and tried to live up to it, but he knew what he was doing, and he did it surely, caressing each inch of skin before moving on to the next.

When he lifted his head he didn't pick her up or hurry her, but they moved slowly to the bed, gliding over the polished wooden floor as though dancing, loosening clothes as they went. She had her hands on his shirt buttons by then, eager to touch her share of bare flesh, and she hardly noticed him release the zip on her skirt and ease it down her legs.

She moved closer, wanting to touch him, and experienced a faint jolt of protest when he pushed her back. He slid his hands up her spine under her top, over her bare skin, easing the fabric up and he helped her lift the silky stuff over her head. When she lowered her arms, her bra slid down and off.

A surge of embarrassment hit her. She'd been naked in front of three men in her life, and she became uncomfortably aware of her relative inexperience and the beauties he'd serviced in his time. She was no beauty.

As though reading her thoughts, although she couldn't feel his presence in her mind, he murmured, his voice as sinful as sex itself, "You're lovely, Alix." He leaned over and dragged back the bedcovers. "I want to look at you properly, but let me catch up with you first. I feel a bit overdressed."

She stared at him, his hair mussed from her hands raking through it, his shirt hanging open and she silently agreed. She accepted his unspoken invitation and hopped into bed, drawing the sheet up over her breasts, feeling better once she was covered. At least he still wanted her. It was nice of him to say she was lovely. It had never mattered to her before, but when she compared herself to the beauties he'd been with, she felt at a distinct disadvantage.

She watched him strip. Now here was beauty. His broad chest, lean with well-defined muscles coming into play only when he used them, almost free of hair. She been with a man with no hair on his chest before, although she suspected one of her past boyfriends had shaved or waxed, because his armpits had been hairless, too. It seemed too calculated to her, as though he expected to spend a lot of time half naked.

Deverell bent to slip off his shoes and socks, allowing her to admire his beautiful butt, pushing against the light wool of his pants, reminding her of the time she'd spent in the shop admiring it. Then he straightened and his hands went to his fly, but he paused, looking at her through thick, black lashes and the heavy lock of dark hair that had fallen forward over his face. His eyeglasses had slipped a little, and he gazed at her over the top of them. He lifted one hand and shoved the hair back, letting her see the ripple of muscles under his lightly tanned skin. His smile turned wicked and he gave her a gentle gyration of his hips. She laughed, not expecting the tease.

When his hands returned to his fly, he took his time, slowly unzipping, glancing up occasionally, as though to make sure she watched him. She couldn't take her attention from him if she tried. He had her. With that tantalizing smile playing over his lips he lifted his hands to his hips, and began to slide the material down his body. As his black pants slid down, he hooked his thumbs under the waistband of his boxers, so they came off too.

Her mouth watered.

Try as she might she couldn't get a good view, and she knew this must be part of his tease. His arm blocked her sight at first, and he kept it there firmly until he had stepped out of the last of his clothing. Then, without warning, he straightened up.

She caught her breath. His cock wasn't the longest or the thickest she'd ever seen, but it was one of the hardest, the dark bulbous tip straining eagerly. "Always nice to be wanted," she managed, and licked her lips which had gone unaccountably dry.

"Let me do that," he suggested in a low, intimate tone, and took the step that brought him to the side of the bed. He swiped off his glasses and put them on the bedside table, not taking his intent gaze from her. Before she could throw back the covers, he'd bent and licked her lips, pausing to trace them before pushing his tongue gently into her mouth. She felt him lift the covers slide into bed next to her, and then his arms went around her, and his kiss turned wild.

Still, she felt his control. Everything he did had an element of calculation to it, though whether to bring himself more pleasure or her, she didn't know. Now, she didn't care.

In his arms she felt warmer than she had for a long time, wanted, not taken for granted. She pressed her breasts against his chest, and felt her nipples tighten against the firm muscles. It felt unbelievably good. He groaned into their kiss, the vibration adding a delicious nuance to their embrace. He shifted closer, and she felt his erection pressing hard into her thigh.

This had better be good, she thought.

It will be.

The words skittered through her brain, sounding like his musical baritone, but they couldn't be. She had erected a mental barrier, had to use it everyday if she didn't want to go completely mad, and it was firmly in place now. She must have imagined the words. He couldn't have pushed past without her feeling the breach.

No time to think about it now. Not when he drugged her senses with long, hot kisses, smoothing his hands over her body and moving gently in her embrace. She slid her hands down to his backside and felt the smooth muscle flex against her skin. He cupped her breasts and stroked his thumbs over her nipples. She gasped at the sharp prickles of sensation, and gripped him harder until he lifted his head and gazed into her eyes. "I have to get some protection, sweetheart," he whispered. Even that sounded sexy. She smiled to say she understood, and he slid away from her, leaving her feeling lonely. He leaned over to pick up his pants, and delved into the pocket, coming out with a foil packet. She didn't like to tell him she had some in her bedside table. They were probably out of date now in any case. She'd bet his weren't.

He opened the packet and pushed back the bedclothes. Alix enjoyed the sight of him sheathing himself, smoothing the rubber over his achingly hard cock. When she made to push the sheet away from his thigh, to help him, he stopped her with a murmur and rolled over, sliding his body back over hers. She welcomed him with open arms and another kiss. His lips were mobile, gliding over hers until he deepened the kiss with a flick of his tongue against her mouth. Willingly she opened for him, and he took possession.

"You feel good," she whispered when he left her mouth to nibble at her neck and work down.

"You took the words right out of my mouth." His breath tickled her neck, then lower, as he slid down her body to lick and suck her nipples. His lips closed hotly around the very tip, before he opened his mouth and took the whole of her nipple inside, sucking

lavishly. Her grip tightened and her stomach muscles went taut with tension. She wanted to touch him, she wanted to kiss his body, feel every inch of his skin against hers, she wanted it all and she wanted it now.

"Shhhh," he murmured, and went lower, dipping his tongue into her navel and driving her mad with wanting. She felt her own wetness seep over her skin to pool on the sheet under them, and finally he slid his fingers into the crease at the apex of her thighs. She couldn't stop herself pushing up to meet him.

"I love the way you move," he said, the words almost a groan.

With a convulsive surge, he came back up to her, resting his weight on one hand while he guided himself to her, fumbling a little in his haste. "I wanted to keep going for a while, make you beg for it, but I can't. I need you now."

If that was just a line, it worked. When he sank down between her legs she lifted them to twine about his, and shifted up, opening herself for him.

He slid inside and she arched up to meet him. Both let out a long sigh, at the same moment, before he bent to take her mouth savagely, forcing a deep penetration, above and below before tearing his mouth away.

Could he? No, it wasn't possible.

But it was. As he pushed inside her, his cock lengthened and thickened, filling her completely. At first, she thought it was their position, the way she curled her legs further up his body to rest her heels on his buttocks to drive him deeper but when he was totally embedded inside her she felt him slide in even further. She opened her eyes to find him watching her closely. "Wh- what just happened?"

He gave her a crooked smile. "I responded to you, that's all. You're drawing me in, Alix. You feel wonderful, I just want to do you justice." But she saw the same dawning wonder in his eyes as she felt in hers. "Relax and enjoy, *cariad*."

He plunged deep, deeper than any man had been before and she jerked up to him in instinctive reaction, crying out in shock and wonder as an orgasm shattered her control. It had come from nowhere, but he drove her even higher, sustaining the wonderful frissons suffusing her whole body. He gave no quarter, and she asked for none, reveling in the best sex she'd ever had, gripping him tightly, forcing him into her.

Dimly she heard his cry of, "Oh God!" before he joined her in the world they had created together, bringing them both to sweet release.

He fell on to his side on the bed, dragging her with him, so they were still joined. His convulsive shudders went on for some time, and despite the condom he wore, she felt the power of his ejaculations, pulsing hotly into her.

It seemed natural to snuggle in and curl one leg over his, but a sharp pain made her pull back with a startled exclamation. He reached out a restraining hand but before he could stop her, she whisked back the bedcovers to discover what was burning her inner thigh.

Something glowed brightly on his hip, orange lights making his skin catch fire in a glowing sunset of colors.

Still panting from the incredible lovemaking, Alix sat up, and touched the mark gingerly. It was hot. As she watched, the glow faded, from yellow to orange to red, duller until it became nearly black. A dragon, the twin of the one on the pendant was etched on his upper thigh. She pushed back the heavy fall of hair obscuring her vision with a shaking hand. "What was that? What happened there?"

She turned to look at him, finding him regarding her solemnly. "You tell me."

Chapter Three

Dev held his breath. Did she know? He'd found out what he wanted to know, the first kiss had told him. She was Talented for sure, perhaps a Sorcerer. He'd suspected as much when she'd told him of her Nadasdy ancestors and now he felt it deep inside her. And she wasn't involved in the murders, thank God.

So did she know that part of her ancestry, and did she know about him? Before he left her apartment, he'd find out. He reached down and removed the used rubber, dropping it in the wastebasket next to her bed, not taking his attention away from her.

She stared at his mark, completely silently until she said, in a shaking voice, "It's the same as the pendant. The same dragon."

"Wyvern," he corrected her. "Dragons have four legs and usually four wings. Wyverns have two of each." She didn't waver, accepting his statement of fact as pragmatically as he'd told her.

"Is it a tattoo?"

"It's a birthmark. Every wyvern has it." Every wyvern with the Talent, not everyone bearing his name.

"It's too perfect to be a birthmark." She leaned closer, her breath fanning his hip. He bit back a groan of desire. One thing was for sure; she didn't know exactly how much she turned him on. He could go again now, even after the spectacular sex they'd just shared.

"Call it enhanced. As you've noticed, it's special." Some shifters called their mark a tattoo; he had done that himself sometimes, but he didn't want to deceive this woman more than he absolutely had to. The urge surprised him. He was so used to concealing what he was, it was almost second nature to him, and necessary if he was to live anything like an ordinary life.

"Everything about you is special."

The compliment warmed him, although he wasn't sure she meant it as a compliment. She still studied the wyvern, as though she dared not look up.

"I would have said that about you, sweetheart. You turn me on like very few women have ever done before." That was true enough, as far as it went.

"What about men?" She glanced up at him and blushed enchantingly as she said; "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that. It just came out."

He chuckled. This was something he could admit to without a qualm. "Sometimes. Occasionally a man turns me on, but not as often as women do."

She traced the outline of the wyvern. "You're bisexual?"

The damned birthmark was getting more attention than he was. He gripped her shoulders and dragged her back up the bed. "Just honest. I'm basically heterosexual, but occasionally I get the urge to see what life is like on the other side. It's fun, but I can't see myself falling in love with a man." Not like he could see himself falling for her.

Where the hell had that come from? No way, *no way* could he do that. He'd had enough of commitment, enough of heartache and disappointment.

But she could be converted.

The mark had glowed, burned on his thigh, and that meant only one thing; this woman was compatible. He was, in effect, a different species, but the shifters were close enough to humans to be able to convert them to their own kind. But only one; the magic

worked only once for each shapeshifter. Probably nature's way of making sure they perpetuated, because fertility rates were low, and the new blood injected by a converted human often made a baby.

Dev tried to put aside the thoughts of converting this gorgeous woman, spending a lifetime—a long lifetime—at her side, but now the recognition had emerged, it wouldn't go away. Oh, she was beautiful, but what did he really know about her? She'd been a member of an organization that had murdered two of his kind, and wanted to rid the world of all Talented beings. Or if she wasn't, her brother definitely was. And she was Talented herself.

To block the thought out of his mind, he kissed her, but it didn't work. Kissing Alix Lancaster was addictive, something he could see himself doing for a long time. And the rest. Smoothing his hands over her skin, he felt the fine texture and reveled in it. "You are completely and utterly gorgeous," he murmured against her lips.

To his surprise, she jerked away from him. "You're overdoing it a bit now."

"What?" He frowned, confused by her response. When he reached for her she drew away further. "What are you talking about?"

"I know you've slept with some truly beautiful women, and I know I'm not truly beautiful. So don't try to sweet-talk me. I know better." She drew the sheet up to cover her breasts and he let out a regretful sigh. "Not that it bothers me normally," she added.

He'd entered her mind during their lovemaking, made himself a way in, so now he entered softly without making her aware of it. She lied. She was bothered. That explained why there wasn't a full length mirror in her room, only a small one above the vanity. His heart ached for her. How could he explain without descending into cliché?

He had to try. He tugged at the sheet and when she wouldn't let it go, tried another tack and pulled her, and it, into his arms. His palms thanked him when they came into contact with her bare back. He'd start there. "Beautiful women, truly beautiful women are beautiful in their own way. Accredited beauties don't believe in their own looks, you know. Models are blank canvases, or so they've told me, just empty spaces designers can paint their pictures on. They have to stay so thin their lives are a misery and their health threatened. When you meet movie stars you'd be surprised how many are just ordinary looking, face to face. The medium of the camera makes them stunning and their own characters make them special. But I don't want to talk about them, not when I have a lovely woman in my arms." He wouldn't let her pull away, although she tried to. Instead of letting her go, he tightened his hold on her. "Wait. I mean it. I'm trying to explain why I wanted you so much."

She stopped struggling and turned her face up to his. "You did?"

He had to laugh at the astonishment he saw and felt in her. "How can you doubt it? The minute I walked into your shop I felt your presence, and I wanted you. You have unbelievably lovely skin." He smoothed his hand up her spine and felt her curl against him in response. "Like the inside of an oyster in color, but soft and warm. It feels like silk under my hand. Every time I touch you, it's like taking a drink of something smooth and warming. Old whisky, perhaps. How can I resist that?" He dropped a light kiss on her soft mouth and paused to gaze down into her face. "You have gorgeous eyes, and I love the way they tilt up at the corners. You have hair long enough for me to play with, and it feels just fine. More than fine."

"I like the way you're skimming over all my bad spots."

"Oh, it'll take a long time to catalogue the good spots. I don't think I'll be finished

this side of midnight." They were so close he didn't need to enter her mind to read the sudden alarm in her eyes. "What is it? Your brother? Will he cause trouble if he finds me in your bed?"

She shook her head slightly. "I wouldn't live here if he did. We bought this apartment together because we couldn't afford anything as good separately, but when we did, we agreed we wouldn't interfere in each others' lives. No, it's not that. But you have to go soon."

Despite her denials, he still felt trouble in her. She was worried about something, and he didn't have to work hard to guess what that was. He'd been lured here, he knew that but for what purpose he wasn't sure now. He'd come expecting to be met with nets, knives and guns, and had instead been fed and—more. So much more.

Shapeshifters fell in love very quickly. Their mental abilities meant they could see right inside a person, and if both agreed, a mutual exploration could lead to love. The glowing tattoo was a reflection of something deep inside, a glow beginning to burn inside him, a glow that might never fade. Not love, not yet. Please, no. He hardly knew her, hardly begun to explore her. But his body responded helplessly to her touch. He couldn't control his reactions when she stroked him as she stroked him now, long caresses on his chest, down to his navel and back up to circle his nipples. "And the way you do that," he whispered, his voice a sinful breath of air, "That is beautiful."

He rolled on to his back, willingly ceding control to her. Her stroking continued, but when she reached his navel she didn't come back up but continued, cradling his balls in one hand, massaging them, driving him crazy. "Can you do that trick while I watch? Heat that tattoo?"

He chuckled, but it ended rather high pitched. "No, I can't. It only happens when I'm inside you."

"Just me?"

"Only you." That was another sign that he could make her his mate, if he wished. If they wished. It had never happened to him before, and the experience had shaken him. While he needed time to think, he also needed to make sure she wasn't rattled, and that she didn't get away. Not before he made sure what side she was on. If she betrayed him, it wasn't just his life at stake.

It was hard to hold on to that thought, while she continued to caress and stroke him, each stroke harder, hotter more stimulating than the last until he wasn't sure he could have spoken any more. She was driving him crazy. When she closed her hand around the base of his shaft and opened her mouth over the head he was sure of it.

Desperately he held on to what remained of his sanity, only the remembrance of what it felt like to sheathe himself in her hot, sweet, body making him hold back. With an effort, he gripped her shoulders and dragged her away. "Have to be inside you," he gasped.

When she pulled away he thought he'd go out of his mind, but she leaned over and slid open a drawer, he finally realized what she was doing and could enjoy the view of her glorious breasts. She returned with a familiar looking foil packet, brandishing it at him. "What do you know, it's in date!"

He reached for her but she evaded him, drawing out of reach and ripping the package open. She sheathed him herself; drawing the rubber down his body in a caress every bit as good as anything he'd ever received from a lover. How could she sell herself short? He'd make sure she didn't do it again. If she gave him the chance.

When she straddled him, he came close to coming like a teenage boy, excited by the sight of her open legs and her glorious breasts. He watched them swing over his face and deliberately held back before lifting up to suck one rosy nipple, feeling it tighten against his tongue. Oh, he could happily stay here for a long time. A very long time.

She held him and sank down on to him, wet flesh enveloping him in heat. He'd never felt anything so perfect before.

He felt himself grow inside her. This time it happened on its own. Usually he had to help it along by concentrating on it, as he would use any other muscle but he rarely did it. This time his cock had extended on its own, as if his instincts had recognized something inside her they wanted to link with.

He leaned back against the pillows, cradling her breasts in his hands, watching her ride him. "Dear God, you must know you're beautiful," he murmured to her. "Believe me, sweetness, at this moment you are the most beautiful woman in the world."

She smiled down at him, her glorious body raised up above him, providing him with all he needed. She filled every sense he owned, her taste in his mouth, her scent in his nostrils, his sense of touch overwhelmed by the slow, easy motions she made on his body. She rested her hands on his chest and he reveled in the feel of her fingers caressing the skin between his nipples. She could do whatever she wanted to him, and he would take every bit of it.

It was time. Steadying himself a little, he entered her mind. Before, he slipped in like a thief in the night. This time he entered boldly.

You feel so good, Alix.

Her eyes snapped open. "You spoke?" She sounded bewildered, lost, and he felt sorry for it. But she could see him now.

"Not with my voice, sweetness. Mind to mind. You can do it, can't you?"

"No!"

Yes you can. Reach out and speak to me.

No!

She clapped one hand over her mouth as though she had spoken the word. When he felt the pressure of her other hand on his chest, as though she was about to lift off him, he reached for her hips, holding her firmly in place.

I felt it as soon as I entered that shop. What's wrong? You know you can do this, don't you?

I mustn't. She stared at him helplessly. I have to stop it.

Why?

It's not normal. It's not right.

It's right for you.

What do you mean?

He'd achieved his objective. He couldn't hold off any longer. Pushing her hips hard down on to him, he thrust up into her. Firmly seated in her mind, he felt her rush of energy, the stimulation impossible to ignore and he rejoiced. He swung her down on to the bed, following her, still deeply within her, mind and body. He used the contact to increase her pleasure, flooding her with pleasurable thoughts and drove hard into her.

Alix arched her back, helplessly pushing into him, her body taking control and her mind bursting with pleasure.

She took him with her, and he gasped at the intensity of the connection, exploding into her in an uncontrollable series of spasms.

Breathless, he fell on to her, only dimly hearing her gasp as she lost her breath, but it was enough. Arms tightly around her he rolled to one side, taking her with him.

The gentle snick of the front door woke Alix. Clay was home. He wouldn't come in, but he'd see Dev's jacket, abandoned in the lounge. He'd know he was here. Her heart contracted in fear. Had he brought Steve, perhaps some of his other PHR colleagues? Would he come in now, take Dev away?

In that moment, she knew she was in deeper than she wanted. Dev had connected with her at a deeper level than anyone in her life had before. Anyone. The experience shook her. She still felt shaky.

She lay in Dev's arms, and it felt so right she could have wept, but she wasn't sure if the tears were for joy or despair. She'd been found out. He knew her secret.

He lifted his hand and touched her cheek. "Don't. Don't cry."

"You can still read me, can't you?" She kept her voice down, although Clay wouldn't be standing outside listening.

"Yes." He reverted to the other way of speaking. *This room is bugged.*

How do you know?

I can sense it.

She stifled a sob. He hugged her tighter.

Wait. He paused, and she felt him leave her, actually felt him remove his presence from her mind. In a moment he was back.

I've incapacitated them. We can speak, if you want to. I know this is still strange to you. Perhaps speaking normally would help.

How did you do that? Incapacitate the bugs?

"Never mind." His voice came as a shock, after the silence, deeply thrilling to her senses, despite her confusion. Had he persuaded her into bed with his mind? Taken over her will? She'd read about that, been warned against it.

Before she could move away, his hold on her tightened. "No, I swear it," he murmured. "You brought me here of your own free will. The only thing between us was mutual attraction. That's all."

She relaxed against him, knowing deep inside that it was true. No one had persuaded her. She had persuaded herself.

"Besides," he continued, his mouth so close to her ear she felt his breath heat the rim, "that kind of thing is condemned. It's called Compulsion and you can be put to death if you're caught practicing it."

She turned to him in alarm, to find him smiling. He gave her a gentle kiss. "Don't worry. I guess there are a few things you don't know about your society. Our society."

"So there is a secret society!"

He chuckled. "No, nothing so organized." He lifted up so he leaned on one elbow, gazing down at her face. "Your family have deliberately kept you ignorant, so you'll be afraid of your basic nature and shun it. You shouldn't, you really shouldn't. But I can't persuade you, only tell you the things you don't know." He lifted his hand, moving a strand of hair away from her face. The light from the bedside lamp cast half his face into shadow, half in light, giving him a mysterious air wholly justified by his words. "Will you let me tell you? At least listen to what I have to say?"

She nodded. It wouldn't do her any harm to listen.

He smiled. "There are others like you, and they stem from your family, the Nadasdys. You remember, you told me your grandmother was a Nadasdy? Every baby is born with natural Psi abilities, but within the first week of birth, they have developed a barrier. It's probable that the abilities came first, and then the barrier was evolved when

men began to live together in communities. To be so open must have been too much to handle. The Nadasdys either never developed a barrier, or have a very weak one. And their abilities are formidable. So much so that they are known as Sorcerers. They can move objects, read minds, attack others using their minds. An immense toll is required of the greatest of these. They have to remain virgins." He moved suggestively against her belly, and she felt his cock, semi hard, pressing against her. "So you aren't one of those."

She smiled, and felt some of the tension inside relax.

"You have gifts because of your heritage, but I'm guessing no one helped you develop them."

"It's wrong," she said, voicing the lessons she'd heard all her life. "It could be extremely dangerous, lead to a super-race."

"It could, but then so could any number of things. Is high intelligence dangerous? Or a superb athletic ability? It's the same. People aren't equal in natural ability. Is it right to ask them to forego that?"

She hadn't thought of it in those terms before. "But high intelligence and a strong body are natural."

"Not to everyone. So why not harness and use these powers to the good of everyone instead of trying to suppress them?"

Alix bit her lip. Put like that, it sounded reasonable. But not every deviant was the same. She'd seen pictures, research. "My brother says there are vampires and shapeshifters. Aren't they deviants? Dangerous?"

"Why are they dangerous?"

With a shock like a jolt of electricity, she realized he hadn't denied their existence, as most people would have done. As she would have done.

He kissed her softly on her forehead. "I haven't denied it because they exist. You know it, I know it. Have you ever seen one?"

She shook her head.

"How do you know?"

"Vampires have long teeth, and they can't face daylight. They can't eat, they cast no reflection and they are allergic to garlic, silver and crucifixes. They are damned. Werewolves have strange eyes, they are allergic to silver and they have to transform once a month. Eventually they go mad from the condition. I think I might notice if I'd met one."

His smile was knowing, and it made her wonder. Had he met one of those creatures? "Only one statement in all that is true. You wouldn't notice, Alix. You've probably walked past them many times, and not detected their presence. They pass in society because they don't want to be noticed."

"Why aren't they conquering the world? They want power, don't they?" This was strange, and she wasn't sure she believed in any of it. She'd left the organization thinking her brother was deluded in many ways. The only thing she sincerely believed in was the abilities she had, and kept trying to suppress.

"No, they don't want power, only peace. I can show you, if you like. Introduce you to one or two. Alix, I can help you make the most of your abilities and help you to control them. Will you let me?"

"No!" Her voice rang around the room, all the fears of a lifetime bursting out of her in one fraught word.

They stared at each other, and she slammed down her mental barrier, closing him off, closing it all off. Then someone hammered on the door.

"Alix! Are you all right in there?"

She breathed out in relief. "Yes, Clay, I'm fine. Go back to bed."

They listened to his retreating footsteps and his door closing.

With a convulsive movement, Dev lifted himself up and off her, pushing back the covers to climb out of bed. "I have to go."

"You won't get a taxi this time of night, not to take you into Manhattan."

He shot her a wry smile and crossed the room to where most of his clothes lay in an untidy heap. "I'll manage." He turned back. "Unless you want me to stay?"

She stared at him in silence. Of course she wanted him to stay, but he had to get away, while he still could. She couldn't betray Clay by telling Dev about the PHR, but she couldn't let them get to Dev. If she hadn't fallen asleep she would have asked him to leave hours ago.

"I thought not." He dressed quickly, and she watched him, her mind in a whirl.

This had been the best sex she had ever had, but more than that, they had connected at a deep level she hadn't even been aware of before. He'd told her so much, undermined some of the things she'd taken for granted. Could she rethink her assumptions? She had to.

When he'd finished he came back to the bed and sat, reaching for the notepad and pen she kept next to the phone. "This is my cell phone number. Call me if you want to know more. I won't force you Alix, but I hope you make the right decision. Denying your true nature can be dangerous, not only because it's bad for your health, but because unless you learn to control it properly, you'll attract any amount of people wanting you. There are scientists who'll want to take you apart to find out what makes you different. There are creatures who will want to use you. Being different doesn't make anyone a saint, any more than any other condition does."

He scrawled a number on the pad and dropped the pen, turning back to her. "Alix, I want you for myself. If I lived here, I'd want to turn this into a proper relationship, but I don't know if we can make it work from opposite sides of the globe. You're here, and my life is in London. But if you want, we can stay friends. Please think about it. I want you, and I want you badly, but you have to want me, too. What you just did was as much a rejection as slamming a door in my face."

He stood, and she resisted the urge to reach for him. She felt cold, alone. Lonely. She'd never felt like that before, but once she'd shared her thoughts with him, she knew what connections she could have.

He went to the door and turned. "I almost forgot. If you want to bring the paintings in to Triscombe's, I'd be delighted to formally assess them for you for sale. And I'm still interested in the pendant. I'll call in tomorrow, for your decision."

She opened her mouth. "Don't come. Don't contact us again. They want you, they want to kill you. I was supposed to identify you tonight, but I didn't. This is too dangerous, Dev. You can't come back."

He shook his head at her. "Alix, Alix, you'll have to come out of your shell sometime. Why not make it now?" Without another word, he left. Another spoken word, that is. Just as she heard the front door click behind him, she heard, distinct in her mind,

Goodnight, my love.

Chapter Four

Dev stood in the dark, sensing and waiting. Three men, all of them standing in the room opposite to this one, waiting for him to move. Tricky. He didn't want them to take him tonight. He'd discovered a few things he wanted a chance to investigate before he walked into the trap. And he was sure they would try to take him. Once he was ready, he'd make it easy for them.

He wasn't afraid for his life; once he'd shifted to the wyvern, very little could touch him, certainly not the attempts of these three men, but he didn't want them to know too much, too soon.

So he did the obvious. He walked into the living room, where a table lamp still burned by the table and found his coat. Some of the items weren't in exactly the right place, but all his things seemed to be there, still. Did these people think shape-shifters carried ID cards on their person? "Deverell Wyvern, antiques dealer and shape-shifter." Yeah, right.

He found what he needed in the kitchen without too much trouble and blessed people who were still economically minded. String and a cheap carrier would do him fine.

As he was about to leave, the bedroom door opened and Clay Lancaster came out, yawning, a toweling robe thrown over pajama trousers. Dev grinned. Like he was fooled for an instant.

"You still here, man?"

"Just leaving." Dev didn't see any point in hiding what he'd been doing there, but neither did he want to advertise it. Clay could draw his own conclusions. So could the other two people concealed in his room. "The paintings are worth bringing in, if you want to do that."

"You won't take them with you?"

Dev grinned. Sure, the way he planned to travel. He'll look stupid enough with a bag tied around him, without four paintings suspended from his neck. "I don't want to take the responsibility until they're safely in the auction house." He paused, thinking about the little Dutch interior. "Take care with them, and bring them in when you can. I'll leave word at the door."

Clay paused, and Dev saw his chance. "I'll have to tell them to expect the paintings. They could be worth a tidy sum. But they'll need my word before they'll take them in."

In other words, if they tried to take him tonight, he wouldn't be able to tell the auction house anything. It wasn't true. If another expert at Triscombe's saw the paintings, he would probably take them anyway, but Clay wasn't to know that.

Clay bit his lip, frowning, and Dev moved towards the door, away from the windows. Shifting and then smashing through the window hadn't been his first choice of exit, and he was profoundly glad he didn't have to take it. Time to show his full hand later, and then only if he had to. "Okay."

Clay moved to stand in the doorway to his room, presumably blocking the two inside. His face was shuttered, but Dev gently probed his mind and found the answer.

Clay didn't want his colleagues to know his sister had slept with Dev. He was afraid Dev would let that little fact slip, if they took him tonight. Clay's mind was a maelstrom of confusion, at least that part of it Dev could read without Clay becoming aware of his intrusion.

Perhaps he could persuade more than one Lancaster to leave the PHR.

Dev made good his escape, racing down and out the building, and into the shelter of another before swiftly stripping and stuffing his clothes into the bag, tying the string in a big loop around his neck. It needed to be big.

He shifted to his full size, twenty feet, nose to tip of tail. Easier than altering his size to miniscule, then spending the rest of the night laboriously flying the distance between Jersey City and his uptown Manhattan hotel. He fuzzed the atmosphere around him, so people looking in his direction wouldn't see him as anything but a shadow.

Shaken to his core by more emotions than he cared to explore, Dev took to the sky with a single leap. The new moon was still two weeks away, but he felt the strain already, the urge to shift. He wanted to leave the man behind, at least for a time.

Usually flying soothed him, gave him a sense of liberation, but tonight his heart was heavy. With every fiber of his being, he longed to be in Alix's bed, holding her close and making love to her. But he'd had to get away. He wasn't quite ready to be taken yet and they would have both been in trouble if they'd found him in her bed. He hadn't realized that before, that even sleeping with a Talent could get a cell member into trouble. Tainted, he'd read in Clay's mind. How could anything so beautiful be described as that?

He recalled the pang of hurt he'd felt when she blocked him, even though he'd tasted her fear. Fear of stepping out of her boundaries, the laws she had lived by, been brought up to believe. If he was to save her, he must persuade her to leave them. Denying her nature was weakening her, making her vulnerable to attack. Her mental block was good, but inadequate for someone like him.

The night air was pleasantly cool against his wings. He let the currents bathe him in gentle strokes, rippling past him when he sped up. Usually he enjoyed the challenge of negotiating past high buildings, his form a bare shadow on the dreams of the people he passed, but tonight he headed for the clouds, careful to keep below ordinary flight paths, where air traffic controllers just might pick up on his presence. Easier than mentally blocking the ultra sensitive equipment they used these days. He needed to think.

From Alix's mind, he'd gained some information she didn't realize she'd passed to him. The names of some of the cell members. She had managed to hide some things from him, an indication of just how powerful she could be, if she allowed herself to use her abilities instead of hiding from them. He couldn't discover where the center of operations was, for instance. She'd locked that deeply away. Her denigration of her lovely body was a side effect of her denial of her true nature, for once she'd begun to doubt the woman she was, everything about her had seemed inadequate.

Hastily he moved away from the mental image of her glorious nakedness, breasts swinging above his mouth, his body embedded in her lush warmth.

Too distracting. He turned his thoughts elsewhere. He spread his wings, feeling the cool night air rushing past and let himself enjoy, taking a short break from the thoughts racing through his brain.

Clay was misguided, sincere, dominant. An alpha, perfectly sure of his world and where he stood in it. Leader of his pack. Dev couldn't smile in his wyvern form, but he felt like it. Sometimes the alpha types were the easiest to defeat, because of their assumptions. Sometimes not. Clay Lancaster was intelligent, cautious, nobody's fool, and his barrier was strong. If Dev had pushed, Clay would have become aware of his presence. Clay already suspected Dev and once Alix told him about the birthmark, he'd be certain.

Dev was going back. He had to try to get Alix out before the hit. Tonight had

established a connection deeper than he wanted, deeper than he'd achieved with anyone else, even those of his own kind. While he might have to abandon that, he wouldn't abandon Alix. He would go back, even if it meant they took him.

"Save her?" The elegant Cristos snorted with derision. "She's been brainwashed since birth, boy. Drop it."

Avoiding the temptation of pointing out that he was probably older than the Deputy Director, Dev concealed his involuntary smile by lifting his napkin to his mouth.

Cristos fixed him with a steely glare. "Don't assume you know everything."

Dev sighed. Very few people knew anything about the dynamic controller of Department Fifty-Seven. Cristos could be anything, from a shapeshifter nobody had seen shift, to a vampire nobody had seen take blood. Or he could be an ordinary man, with extraordinary psychic gifts. "I want Alix Lancaster out before we hit the farmhouse. I don't want her involved. She left the PHR, at least as an active member. Surely that means she's begun to think for herself." Dev glanced around the restaurant. Although nearly every table was taken, the ones either side of theirs were unoccupied. This was one of Cristos's favorite eating places, and the staff here knew his preferences well. He liked to bring people here to put them at their ease. Either that, or the food was too irresistible to pass up.

"She saw some pictures of the murders." Cristos picked up his fork and attacked his pastry, methodically demolishing it with small, precise bites. "She's seen what the organization did to its captives, but she refused to participate. She chickened out, which doesn't indicate cowardice to me, more like seeing the light, however dimly."

Dev, dressed for business in Saville Row tailored suit, shirt and tie, sighed again and reached for his coffee. "I think she keeps herself apart. It's never been our job to destroy the innocent, but protect it. You must believe that."

The pastry nearly gone, Cristos laid his fork gently down on his plate. "Of course I do. But I can't afford to let anyone escape."

"What will you do?"

"You know what we'll do. If they fight back, we'll protect ourselves. Whenever possible, we'll bring them in, let the Sorcerers at them. After they've finished, the subjects won't remember what the PHR is, and if they fight back, they won't remember their own names."

He met Cristos's steely glare with one of his own. "She's a Sorcerer."

Cristos shook his head. "She has a Nadasdy grandmother. That means nothing, Dev. Not all of them are gifted to Sorcerer level and not all to the same extent. We made that mistake before, and we won't make it again. Each on his or her own merits." He sounded regretful, as he should. "Don't mistake this, Dev. This is war, and we can't afford to be too merciful. Where we can't persuade, we have to prevent, even if it means taking lives."

Dev wondered if Cristos ever stepped outside his own personal comfort zone. At least Alix was prepared to try. "Give me a chance, Cristos. Let me get her out first."

Cristos signaled the waiter, who disappeared into the kitchen. "As long as it doesn't jeopardize the operation or the operatives. Bring her in, and we'll see if she's salvageable."

The waiter brought coffee and they chatted about generalities until he'd gone. As soon as he was out of earshot, Cristos said what Dev knew he must. "Do you want out? Tell me now, because in a few hours it will be too late."

"No. I most definitely want in." No hesitation needed.

"You connected with her." It was not a question.

He had to be fair. Cristos was briefing a team of operatives later that day. It wouldn't just be his own neck at stake. "Yes, I did. She's compatible, Cristos, and that means she has a Talent. My birthmark burned, and it's the first time that's happened to me so strongly. As things stand, it looks as though she's a Sorcerer, but I don't know how strong her Talents are. She held some things apart from me, and I couldn't get through without alerting her."

Cristos's head came up sharply. "You kept yourself apart? You told her nothing else?"

He sighed. "Yes. She knows I'm telepathic, but nothing else about me."

"There's only one situation in which your birthmark activates. You slept with her." He made it a statement of fact. As it was.

Dev crooked an eyebrow. "I'm not involved with anyone else and she's very attractive. And unattached. I would have tried to do that if I'd met her at a social function."

"You're attached to her."

"I don't sleep with women I'm not attached to." He met Cristos's gaze frankly. "I have to tell you if you take me off this assignment, I'll go in anyway—for her."

Cristos sighed and tossed his crumpled napkin on to the table. "Very well. You're a reliable operative, Dev, you've never let me down. So let them take you, and then wait. The team will follow the electronic signal and they'll be with you in hours. I've been working towards this with Evan Howell. We want to combine natural ability with electronic surveillance, see if we can connect the two and reinforce the strength of each." He flashed Dev one of his quick smiles that transformed his face from sharp, cold alertness to warm friendliness, with a suddenness that could make the recipient blink. Perhaps the mention of his stepson helped. Howell probably knew Cristos better than most, being the son of Cristos's ex wife by her first marriage. Everyone close to the CIA Deputy Director knew how fond he was of Evan Howell, and, if truth be told, his ex-wife Miranda, too.

The smile disappeared, leaving Cristos gazing at Dev with a friendly concern. "If I could recruit you as an agent you'd damn well do as you were told. I could protect you better, too."

This made Dev laugh out loud, a short bark of amusement. "Never, my friend. You will never get me like that. I'm a consultant to—several places, as are most of my colleagues. We don't work directly for governments, you know that."

"Some of you do."

"Not my family." They had made that mistake many years ago. The Wyverns had been important to several medieval kings, English, Scottish and French, but now they preferred to keep in the background. Even if they did go into government affairs, they never used their Talents. It was too dangerous, too close to the surface. "No, Cristos, you won't get me, or my family, any more than MI6 or Interpol will. And you know why."

Cristos smiled. "Yes, I know why. But I'll keep trying."

"I know you will."

"Did you sleep with him?"

Clay's question took Alix by surprise. When they'd bought the apartment they had set out the rules and never once broken them. What they did behind their bedroom doors

was their own business, and unless they volunteered the information, their sibling couldn't know for sure. Now Clay asked her the question, the one they had banned. "You know I'm not going to tell you that."

"Just this once, Alix. Humor me."

She lifted her chin. "If I answer this, you never ask me again. Agreed?"

Clay nodded, his dark gaze fixed on her face. "I want to know what happened."

"Nothing unusual. What you think. We went to bed, he went home."

"You know what I'm asking you. Did he say anything, did you connect?" Clay strode to the counter she sat behind and leaned over, leaning his big hands on the timber rim. "Just tell me."

"No, I didn't connect with him." She met his gaze coolly. After all, he started it. It was almost a relief to lie to him. Clay couldn't even bring himself to use the dreaded word, 'telepathy.'

He kept her gaze for a full minute without talking, like the staring games they played as children. This time he looked away first, but it didn't mean defeat. Not this time. "You did. You slept with him and you connected with him."

He spun around and walked to the shop door, flinging it open so it banged hard against the wall. There'd be a dent there soon, if he kept that up. "Today we'll take him."

Alix looked up from her work, startled by the commotion of three burly men entering the small, intimate shop, which had been so peaceful a moment ago.

The men crowded the space left for customers, staring around. They were all members of the PHR, all people Alix tried to avoid these days. Steve, Ivan and Andy. Steve winked at her, but she ignored him. Steve had always wanted her, but she had no desire to be dragged back to the PHR now she'd left. Handsome, arrogantly sure of himself, anyone Steve took up with would have to do as they were told, and Alix wasn't good at that.

Andy said, "You want us to hide?"

Clay laughed. "Oh yeah, but just for now. One in the back room, two in the van around the corner."

"You've double parked?" Alix asked. She scolded herself for making a stupid comment but it had been the first thing that came into her head. Of course they hadn't, even though it was nearly impossible to find a parking space around here. They would have been here at dawn to make sure of one. A chill spread through her body. "You mean to go through with it, then?" Clay nodded, glancing back to where she sat. "You think it will take all these to capture one man?"

"Man?" Clay laughed again. Obviously, the thought of capturing 'a live one' as he usually put it had put him in a good mood. "This isn't a man. It's a creature pretending to be human. An animal. But they can be very strong." She hadn't fooled him for a minute. He knew her too well. He'd kept them out until he'd asked her the question that revealed her sensitivity, but he didn't believe her. Either that or he'd made his mind up earlier. She'd wondered where he'd been when she woke up. They usually drove into work together, but when she'd got up that morning, Clay had already gone, leaving her a brief note saying he'd see her at the shop. He must have gone to get his friends. And the van.

Alix leaned both hands on the wooden edge of the glass counter in front of her, where Clay's hands had recently rested, steadying herself, trying to think. "I still think you're wrong. I saw nothing of it."

"You can't be sure." Clay fixed her with a hard stare, reminding her. She had to

keep quiet about her gifts, or the PHR would take her, too. Moreover, she'd just admitted to going to bed with Dev. While she knew Dev wouldn't betray her, such an act was condemned and she would be tainted, subjected to a painful and embarrassing procedure to ensure she wasn't pregnant and an equally embarrassing 'cleansing' ritual before anyone from the community was allowed near her again.

She put up her chin. "I think he's just an antique dealer, and you're getting paranoid."

Clay sighed. "We traced his family. If he's not a deviant, someone in his family is. Alix, sweetheart, we've been watching him for some time, and when he came in yesterday for the pendant, I was just about as sure as I could be. He wants that jewel."

"Yes, it's his family crest. He wants it for his mother. I really think you have the wrong person here." Fear clutched at her throat. Could she leave, try to warn Dev? She'd tried his cell earlier, but he'd been on voicemail. She had to try to call him again.

Her brother crossed the room to take her hands in his. "It's a talisman, it has meaning for him. He wants it badly. Either he's been ordered to get it, or he wants it on his own account. If he's not a deviant, we can save him. We won't hurt him, but he needs to know about his relatives and join us in the fight. If he is a deviant, then we're saving the rest of humanity." He grinned. "We're planning to put a candidate up at the next election. How do you fancy your brother as a Congressman?"

He was joking, surely. There couldn't be enough votes for him. "You'll waste your money."

"No we won't. Plans are going ahead, sweetheart. We're moving voters in to the area and we'll have something in place for the next election. We're on our way."

Yes, but where?

Everything she had been worrying about started to coalesce. If she ignored this, it wouldn't go away. It would only get worse. She was no nearer knowing what she wanted to do, just that she had to do something, if only to break with her brother. Plans began to race through her head, but she stopped herself. She had to think about Dev. Warn him before he walked into what could be, for him, a death trap.

Was having telepathic abilities so bad? What they were planning for Dev was far worse than anything he was. She remembered what he'd said to her last night. That having high intelligence or superior strength was the same. That had been an eye-opener for her, and the more she thought about it, the more sense it made.

Lazy thinking. She'd allowed herself to drift, because it was easier not to think about it. She loved her brother, but she couldn't love what he was, what he was becoming.

She watched Clay make his arrangements, then she picked up her purse. "I'm going to lunch. He won't be here yet."

"Why not?"

"He said he'd be here in the afternoon. It's barely twelve now."

"It might be better if you don't come back," he said thoughtfully. "Why don't you take the rest of the day off?" He put his hand on her arm just before she left the shop. "Did you take the paintings in to Triscombe's?"

"Yes." She'd dropped them off this morning but Dev hadn't been there. "I'm surprised you want to go ahead with the sale."

Clay shrugged, his massive shoulders threatening to split the seam of his jacket. "That has nothing to do with anything. We planned to sell those, anyway. That's family business with the auction house, it has nothing to do with this." He gave her a boyish grin.

"Go buy yourself something nice." To compound his mistake he pushed a fifty dollar bill in her hand.

She wouldn't have taken that from a boyfriend, much less a brother barely two years older than she was, but she didn't stop to argue. That would come later. She had other things to do.

An hour later, Alix was ready to give up. Dev's cell was still on voicemail, and he hadn't shown up at the auction house. The very superior woman at the reception desk told her nothing except that she expected him to call in later in the afternoon.

Alix left Triscombe's cursing herself, wishing she'd asked him where he was staying. New York was full of hotels, there was no way she could work out which one and the woman at the auction house refused to give her any details, instead, choosing to sneer. Alix knew what the woman thought, but she didn't care. One of Deverell Wyvern's casual pickups, the attitude and body language said. Alix learned nothing.

Where was he? There was nothing more she could do, nowhere she could think of checking. She had to go back.

The shop looked perfectly normal, except the restaurant across the street contained two men she recognized lingering over their meal, and a dirty white van was parked in the side street.

She didn't want them to take Dev. He wasn't evil; he didn't threaten them in any way. How could she have believed that shit for all those years?

She hadn't, that was the answer. The people she'd loved had dedicated themselves to their cause, even when it became obvious she herself had some elements of the deviant. They had loved her, sheltered her, helped her to ignore her sensitivity as much as she could. Their kindness and constant love, not to mention their loyalty, had helped her ignore the ugly facts of the PHR. She couldn't ignore them any longer. But she was on her own. She had nowhere to go, no-one to help her. Last night Dev had told her there was no organization to contact.

When she walked through the door, she met his eyes as he straightened up to look at her.

"G-good afternoon," she managed. She glanced at her brother. He nodded, smiling. He was in Dev's line of sight. Nothing except a slight tension in the thick cords of his neck showed anything was any different.

"Hello," Dev said warmly. He took a step towards her and she felt panic surge through her veins. He frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"N-no, no nothing." She forced a smile. She had to get him out of here.

Alix swung towards her brother, taking the step that took her to the counter. "Are we selling him the pendant now?"

The black velvet box lay open on the counter, and Dev held the pendant in his hand. A memory came to her of that same hand caressing her breast and she faltered.

His eyes met hers. Had the thought come from him, or was he sharing her thoughts? He smiled, and her heart melted. She had to get him out of here!

"Would you like to look at it in daylight?"

She indicated the door. Closer. He took a couple of steps towards the door, towards freedom.

"Good idea." The words were so unexpected Alix paused and looked back at Clay. He was smiling affably. "Have a good look at it." Had she mistaken her brother's

intentions? Perhaps he'd changed his mind, listened to reason and decided Dev was no threat after all. Her heart warmed to him, remembered her brother as the overprotective teddy bear he'd been for most of her life. Clay held his hand out and Dev passed him the pendant. With a smile, Clay slipped the chain over Alix's head. It swung heavily over her white silk blouse, just above her breasts.

"It looks good there, Alix. Let's go and get a drink and let Deverell get a proper look at the thing. If you want to give us fifteen hundred for it, we have a deal." He held out his hand and Dev took it without hesitation. They shook hands, and then left the shop.

It was almost unheard of for both Alix and Clay to leave this early in the day. It was barely three, and they usually locked up nearer to six. If a special customer wanted them to open late, they never hesitated.

Clay took a moment to lock up and Alix hung back with him. "You've decided not to do it?"

Clay smiled affably at her. "What you told me this morning helped me to make up my mind. Let's have a drink on it."

"I think we should," she said, smiling broadly at him. He was, after all, Clay. Relief surged through her like a wave of thankfulness and she opened her mind, trying to contact Dev. *It's all right. He won't do anything.*

I'm glad.

That was all he said, but the intimacy warmed her.

Dev didn't pay her too much attention on the way to the little bar they frequented, just around the corner from the shop. He treated her politely, but he didn't show her any special affection. Part of her wanted him to, wanted him to stake a claim, so she could stake hers, but another part was grateful. He had to get away from her. She couldn't have a relationship with someone like him, it was too dangerous for them both. In any case, his home was too far away. Even if he'd been normal they couldn't have managed it.

It was such a shame she liked him so much.

The bar was half empty. They slid into a booth and ordered beer, with some good natured joshing between Clay and Dev about the difference between English beer and American. "Warm beer, don't know how you can stand it," Clay declared, a friendly belligerence in his eyes and a smile curling his full lips.

"Not warm. It's at room temperature, or a couple of degrees below. You have to get the taste for it, then nothing else is quite as good." Dev leaned back, seemingly perfectly at ease, a bottle in his hand. His accent was slightly more obvious now. Perhaps the beer was getting to him.

When Dev got up to go to the john, Clay waited until he was out of sight and then turned to Alix, a sense of urgency on his face that hadn't been there before. "We're taking him in," he told her.

Her heart sank. "Oh, Clay, I thought you believed me!"

He grimaced. "I do, but the others don't. So here's the plan. You go with him, as though we're taking you, too. Then he'll think you're on his side. Get him to confess or deny, and the others'll believe you too."

"Do they know about last night?"

He shook his head. "They know you gave him dinner, but not the rest. I don't want you to go through that, sweetheart. I had to bring you out here to tell you, otherwise they would have just taken him. I'm going to drug him, and you too, but it won't take effect for about twenty minutes. Enough time for us to get back to the shop."

"What drug?"

"Just something to make you sleep. Those pills Mom used to take."

Wildly she searched for a reason not to go, and came up with something. "Who will look after the shop?"

"I've called Eve Ferrer." A woman who ran a craft shop near the museum, someone who'd helped them out with staff before. Clay leaned back and folded his arms. "That pendant looks very good on you. I still think there's something special about it."

She'd forgotten she was wearing it. When she covered it with her hand, it seemed to glow, warmer than it should have been, but not as hot as Dev's birthmark had felt the previous night. She released it as though she'd been stung.

"He'll be back any minute." Clay leaned forward, fixing her with his hard, blue stare. "I'm going to take you and throw you in with him. I'll curse you for trying to warn him, but I'll tell the others it's a trick to get him to talk. I won't tell anyone about your gift, and this isn't for real. Get him to talk to you, tell you what he is and we'll know for sure. Do this and you'll be a real patriot. These people are as much terrorists as anything out of Afghanistan, Alix and our country is in danger from them."

Flawed, wild reasoning that scared Alix out of her mind. She would go, but not because she wanted to help them. She wanted to keep Dev alive.

When he returned, Clay was at the bar, ordering a pitcher of beer. This was where the sleeping pills would go, she was sure of it. She only had time to touch Dev's hand and open her mouth to speak to him before Clay swung around, pitcher and glasses in hand. He partially filled the glasses, and Alix had no doubt he'd already administered the powdered pills.

There was only one route left to her. Alix opened her mind and called him.

Dev, they mean to take you!

I know, sweetness. Don't worry.

But they'll kill you, Dev!

He took her hand, caressing her palm with his thumb. *No they won't. I won't let them.*

Frantically she tugged at him, but Clay had reached them, and put a glass before them. "Drink up."

They drank. If Dev was going, she had to go with him.

Shortly after, they left the bar and headed back to the shop. They never got there. At the corner of the street, Dev reeled and reached for the wall, steadying himself. "Whoops!" Clay said merrily, grabbing him around the waist.

Dev leaned his head back and took a breath. "I'm not drunk," he said, but his words were slurred and he sounded drunk. Someone tried to pass them, glancing back at them, then hurried ahead.

A wave of dizziness hit Alix and she knew why Dev had staggered. Before she hit the floor strong arms had seized her and swept her up. It couldn't be Clay, when she stared over at him, desperate to find something to concentrate on, to stop the world spinning around her, she saw Clay bending to lift Dev. Dev's eyes were closed and his limbs flopped wildly as Clay fought to control the taller man.

Everything slid away from her and the world went black.

Chapter Five

Groaning, Dev opened his eyes. He lay on his back on a hard floor. Instantly he wished he'd had the foresight to keep his eyes closed; there might be someone watching him. It would give him an edge if they thought he was still asleep.

"Dev?"

He turned his head sharply towards the source of the sound, and groaned. Pain shot from his spine up his head, arcing through his brain.

Soft hands reached for him, smoothed over his forehead. He felt her lift his shoulders and settle him on her lap. He could only be grateful, for the pain was almost overwhelming. Elevating his head like that made him feel slightly less nauseous.

"Keep still," she murmured. "You must have had more of the drug than me."

"Yes." His head swam, but he remembered. He'd had a bottle of beer and a glass from a jug. The glass, Clay had doctored the glass and poured a small amount of beer into it to dissolve the powder. "What did he use, do you know?"

"To drug us?" She bit her lip. "I think it was the stuff my mother used to use. I took it a couple of times when I had the toothache and I woke up groggy with a headache."

"It was an opiate, wasn't it?"

A pause. "Yes."

He groaned softly. If he'd made a louder sound he feared he might throw up. "I'm allergic to opiates."

"I didn't think that was possible."

"Believe me, it's possible." For shapeshifters. It was as common in his community as allergy to penicillin was in the human community. But he wouldn't tell her that. Not yet. Unlike most of the rumors about his kind, this one was true, and a closely guarded secret.

He had to get this muck out of his system, then he had to find out where they were. Perhaps Cristos's backup team would arrive before he had to do something violent. After all, the whole point of this exercise was to locate the headquarters of this particular cell. He only hoped they'd brought him there.

Too late to try to vomit the poison out. All he could do was endure and hope his condition improved rapidly. He'd only taken an opiate once before, a painkiller after a minor surgical procedure, and it had alerted the doctors to his condition. Most large hospitals had a small unit tucked away for emergency procedures for his kind, and there were small, private hospitals for the sick shapeshifter. It was in one of those he'd had his operation, to remove an impacted wisdom tooth, of all things. Timing was important, as no one wanted the compulsory monthly change to happen on the operating table.

"Why have they taken you?"

"Because we spent the night together." He felt her probing at him, trying to communicate with him, but he couldn't. He tried to tell her.

"I can't do that. Not when I'm in this state."

"Ah. Sleep then. How long will you be like this?"

"Hard to say. Hopefully not very long."

He drifted off to sleep, his head still in her lap.

When he awoke he felt a lot better. A headache still nagged at one side of his skull,

but it was bearable. He still lay on something soft, but not her lap. A blanket, folded under his head, the rough surface tickling his cheek. Dev opened his eyes. This time, light didn't stab into his head, forcing him to keep his eyes closed. That was an improvement. He looked around.

He lay in a cage. He still wore his suit of yesterday or the day before, and someone had covered him with a blanket, as well as tucking one under his head. The bars of the cage gleamed dully around him, thick and narrowly spaced. Easy to escape from. All he had to do was shift and shrink. It was impossible to see what lay beyond the bars. Bright lights, all trained into the cage blinded his human sight. The wyvern would be able to see more. Another reason he couldn't see was that he wasn't wearing his eyeglasses. That was a bummer. He could see perfectly as a shifter, but in his human form he was severely near-sighted. He could partially shift, but he wanted to be fully aware of his surroundings first, make sure he wasn't observed.

He sat up, and closed his eyes while his balance settled. Just how long had he been here? He lifted his arm, but someone had taken his watch. There was no daylight in this chamber, only artificial, so he was either underground, in a windowless room, or they'd covered the windows. At any rate, he couldn't tell the time of day.

The floor of the cage was hard and unyielding. Probably metal, to deter escape. Not that it would.

A movement alerted him to the presence of another, and a flash of memory returned to him. Pain, and Alix. She was here. He saw a blurred shape at the far end of the cage and wondered why she wasn't with him. Surely it was natural for prisoners to huddle together?

She sat up and spoke. "You're awake."

"As you see. Which is more than I can."

"I took off your eyeglasses so you wouldn't break them." She stood up and took the three steps that brought her to him. "Here they are." She bent and picked up an object from the far side of the cage, something that glinted in the bright light. She handed them to him and with a sigh of relief he put them on.

"I feel vulnerable without these," he confessed.

"Hush!"

Why had she said that? He felt her probing at him, trying to enter his mind, but he reached out and took her hand, pulling her down to sit next to him. "I can't, not after that." He didn't want to say 'opiates' out loud, in case they were bugged. He couldn't remember what he'd said earlier, but he prayed it hadn't been that. "It will come back soon."

She stared at him, aghast. "How long?"

He shrugged. "It varies. A few hours to a whole day. Depends on how much I had."

"A lot," she said gloomily.

Alix was dressed in the soft silk shirt and trim navy skirt she'd had on in the shop, but it was no longer clean and neat. The white shirt was stained with dirt and creased; the skirt was in the same state. She'd undone the tie that held back her hair and it tumbled around her shoulders. She still looked wonderful.

"I did this to you, didn't I?"

Smiling wistfully, she shook her head. "I did it to myself. I should have done it a long time ago."

"What are they going to do with us?" She must know something; she'd been a

member herself at one time. "Why haven't they killed me already?"

She lifted her knees up and rested her cheek on them, circling her legs with her arms. "They're not murderers, Dev."

"No?" He allowed his upper lip to curl into a sneer. "I could give you some examples."

"They want you to prove that you're normal, then they'll talk to you and let you go." She was telling him something, but he couldn't tell what.

"If I knew what normal was, I'd oblige them." He hated being this alone. To lose the ability to connect to others was agony. Only at these times did he realize how truly alone the human was and he felt a wrenching pain when fear clutched him. What if his telepathy really left him this time? What if it never came back?

He felt fingers curl around his, and he gripped them like a lifeline. Slowly, he steadied himself, forced his panic to subside. He opened his eyes, gazing up at her. "Thank you." He kept hold of her hand, anchoring his emotions in the simple link. "Do you believe in all this? This deviant stuff?"

She swallowed. "I used to."

She was evading his question. Why? Oh how he wished he could read her! All he had to do was evade. Cristos's team must be on its way by now. All he had to do was hang on and try to discover as much as he could before the cavalry arrived.

"Where are we?"

"I don't know. I was drugged too, remember?"

She wouldn't look him in the eyes. "You do know, or you suspect."

She shrugged. "I don't even know how long we've been out."

"I don't think they gave me more than one dose." Or it would have been even more difficult to recover. Opiates wouldn't kill him, but he might want them to, before they left his system. "That narrows it down nicely."

God, he wanted to sleep, just until the drug had gone. And pretty soon he'd need to pee; not something he was looking forward to, either.

He saw they had set a bucket in the corner of the cage. He shuddered. He needed something to take his mind off the necessity. "Why have they taken you?"

"Because of what we did the other night."

"Not because of what you are?"

"I'm just a woman, an ordinary person trying to make a living." She was remarkably calm, deadpan even.

"You're not, you know that. You're special."

She smiled. "No I'm not."

"Believe me, sweetness, you are. As special as I am." Her gaze sharpened, and he guessed she realized he was telling her something more.

A clang attracted his attention. A metal door, or a metal lined one. It opened and closed, a flash of light telling him it was daylight, but he turned his head too late to discover any more clues.

"Here." A male voice he didn't know opened a small hatch at the base of the door and shoved a tray through. "Food. If you eat human food, that is."

Typical prejudiced remark. "I'm human."

"Yeah, right."

"I wonder if you are." Get him talking. See if Alix recognizes him. "Humans, or at least those of the humanitarian variety don't do this to their fellow man."

"Bleeding heart philosophy."

"My, my aren't we sensitive?" he taunted, just for the hell of it this time.

"Well, pretty soon there'll be one less deviant in the world. But—" he bit the word off, as though he'd just received an order. He could have been wearing a headset.

'But' what? What was he about to say? Working through the clouds obscuring his brain, Dev tried to work it out. What would he do in their place?

Of course! That was why they kept him alive that was what they wanted to do. Find out who he knew, lead them to his friends and fellows. That would be the only reason. The other people, the scientists, would have had him hooked up to any number of machines, perhaps be cutting into him, so he supposed it could be worse. Not much worse. He had Alix to look after. That might be why she was here. To slow him down.

He heaved himself up off her lap, although it was by far the most comfortable place in the bare space they occupied. After giving himself a moment for his head to clear, he got unsteadily to his feet and walked to the tray. Pigswill would have been more appetizing, and there was no way he was going to consume anything they provided. Fleetingly it crossed his mind it would be better to be a vampire at times like this. At least he would be able to drink, and the after effects of taking opiates included a powerful thirst. The tin jug of water looked awfully tempting. He heard Alix come up behind him. "At least they're not going to starve us."

"A far cry from your goulash," he said wryly. "We can't take it."

"Why not? Oh!" Realization darkened her eyes. "What if I take a drink?"

He turned away from the tray and put his hands on her upper arms. "Think, Alix. We need to get out of here, both of us. You're here to slow me down, if I am what they think I am. Clever. But if you're drugged you'll slow me down even more." Don't worry, he wanted to tell her. They're on their way. But he couldn't, not yet, although he felt the clouds clearing from his mind.

She ran her tongue along her lower lip. She must be thirsty too. It hurt him to deny her relief, but they must resist, at least until they couldn't any more. Pretty soon he'd be able to shift, and then he could get both of them out, with little trouble.

"Do you have super powers? Can you get us out of this?" Tears gleamed in her eyes, but she blinked them away.

"Not superman. Just an ordinary, everyday shapeshifter." He pulled her into his arms, intending to comfort her.

The dazzling lights went out with a snap, and others came on. At the same time a voice cried out, "Let her go!" A voice he knew.

Clay Lancaster.

It didn't surprise him to see Clay here, but it did sadden him. He released Alix, trying to show her how sorry he was that her brother was involved in this hateful thing. She stared back, her dark eyes fathomless and unreadable. "I'm sorry too."

She walked towards the door. Clay unfastened the padlock and drew the heavy chain through the keepers. Frozen, Dev watched Clay Lancaster help his sister over the threshold before the door clanged shut again.

Clay kissed her on the cheek. "You're a very clever girl, and a brave one. The PHR will thank you."

She had betrayed him. That one foolish, whispered word had told them what they were dealing with. He couldn't believe it, that she had betrayed him and he'd been so

stupid.

"Why did you do it, Alix?"

She turned to face him, her eyes gleaming. "Someone has to stop you people. Clay told me."

Had she been brainwashed? He couldn't have read her wrong, surely? Mouths could spout lies, but it took a powerful master to lie effectively without speaking.

Someone like a Sorcerer. Someone with her ancestry.

Clay watched him, a superior smile curling his thin lips. "You can't change a lifetime's teachings in one night, my man. Or whatever you are. What is it, werewolf? Werepanther? Well you've killed your last mortal, and we have you. A live one!" His smile broadened in direct proportion to the depth of Dev's frown.

Dev folded his arms, trying to ignore the headache still pounding at his brain. "You're completely mad, you know that?"

"We'll find out everything you know before you die." Clay was in his element, one arm draped around his sister's shoulders, his eyes fixed on his prize. "And you *will* die, don't doubt that. It's the way you'll die that you can control. Tell us everything and we'll make it quick."

Dev quirked an eyebrow. "What makes you think you can control me?"

"You happen to be a creature we know a lot about. Other groups specialize in vampires, but we've taken werewolves and their brothers for our special study."

Dev felt dizzy and it wasn't all the headache. It was like Alice's looking-glass, a world that was a reflection of his own, but distorted in a particularly weird way. It was partly their own fault, of course, but who ever thought it would come to this?

"So what do you know about-us?" He might as well find out what he could. They would find him no pushover. Even in his human form, he wasn't defenseless. He kept his attention on Alix, all the time running around in his brain; how could he have been so wrong? She would tell them about the opiates. He could be done for.

Better not to think about that, to concentrate on eating nothing, drinking nothing and allowing nobody close enough to him to use a syringe. That way he'd regain his abilities sooner. It was as though a fog obscured his brain and it was slowly lifting, as it did over the Welsh valleys in the early morning, remaining in the deepest hollows last, only clearing completely by the middle of the day.

"Oh, everything. But you're the first we've caught-alive. We know all the defenses. Our weapons are loaded with silver bullets, the light will blind you and prevent you changing to your wolf form, it's a week or more to the full moon so you won't be able to change until then. And just in case, this place has all the jamming equipment in place—in case you're tagged, like a good little doggie."

The last part was a definite blow. That was the last time he let Cristos talk him into depending on damned electronic gadgets. That probably meant he was on his own. Completely on his own.

"So what do you need me for?" he asked. "You seem to know everything about my kind." He took a step forward and was gratified to see Lancaster take a step back.

"Oh yes," the man said, as though remembering something he'd forgotten. "And this cage is silver. You won't be able to get through these bars."

"That must have cost you a pretty penny," he remarked, but he was careful not to get too close to the bars.

Foolish to demonstrate the fallacy of that particular theory.

"Come on, Alix." Clay steered Alix towards the door, which he could now see. "We need to get out of here. I've got a steak with your name on it."

The last thing Dev saw of them was Alix's eyes, as she turned her head to stare at him. He couldn't read her expression; he couldn't read her, or anyone else.

If it had been full moon, nothing could have stopped him shifting. As it was, until the opiate completely cleared from his system, he didn't want to risk it. And he wanted Alix, he wanted her badly. If only to tear her apart.

Before the switch went off and the dazzling spotlights came back on Dev saw something glinting, suspended from the ceiling of the large, blank room. A camera.

Now he had something else to worry about. If he shifted, that would give them evidence to work with, more knowledge he didn't want to give them. He doubted there would be accessible film in them, rather, the footage would go on to disk somewhere, to be copied and spread around the various cells, perhaps put up on websites to incite terror. And more persecution.

He sat down, careful to avoid the bars of his cage, not because they would hurt him, but because they would not, and any myths they believed and spent money on must count as a weakness against them. He lifted his knees and laid his chin on them, wrapping his arms around his shins in the same pose Alix had used earlier. Thinking.

Clay Lancaster had been right. There was no way Dev could have countered the teachings of a lifetime in one night. He'd been arrogant to assume it. He still wanted to get Alix out of here alive, but for an entirely different reason. To take her back for the Sorcerers to probe and question.

When they returned, Alix came with them. There were more of them; three men he didn't recognize, and Alix. They stared at him before one unlocked the cage and stepped inside.

He ignored him and turned to her. "Why did you do this? You can't believe this shit, surely?"

She shook her head, mutely.

"Alix, did it mean nothing? I thought we connected. Talk to me, dammit!"

She found her voice. "I'm sorry, Dev, so sorry. But Clay is family, the only family I have left now. Werewolves murdered my parents. I have to do all I can to stop that happening to anyone else."

He wanted to howl, but he held back. Then they would have their confirmation, except that he wasn't a werewolf. There was no such thing, not in his experience, though unlike the members of the PHR, he was open to any evidence anyone could provide. Perhaps in the far reaches of Siberia there was a tribe of werewolves. "How did it happen?" He lowered his voice to a soft, persuasive purr.

Another man entered the cage. They circled him warily, watching for an opening. Dev saw they half-crouched, wide legged stance and knew he was in trouble.

A third man entered, holding a syringe. Then he knew. She had betrayed him.

He turned to her, not hiding his anguish, his fury at her deception. "You told them! How could you do it? Do you want to see me dead, destroyed, all in the name of racial purity?"

Her face was pale in the harsh light. "I can't help it, Dev. I have to be this side of the bars."

"Don't call me that! Only my friends call me Dev. I'm a thing to you, aren't I? So

there's no need to grace me with a name."

The men closed in. Dev struck out, but someone caught his hands. He went down on his back, lashing out with his feet, contacting twice, three times with a give of flesh and a satisfying cry of pain from his opponents. But these men knew their business. Someone wrenched his arms behind his back, sending pain shooting up to his shoulder and he felt cuffs snap into place.

One ripped his sleeve, dragging the jacket down, and he twisted, trying to elude the inevitable.

The needle went in with a vicious stab and he went down to the sound of a feminine cry.

"You said you wouldn't hurt him." Alix toyed with the remnants of the food on her plate, no longer hungry, her guts twisting with the brutal treatment she'd seen doled out to Dev.

"Alix, he's a thing. He's not a person, he's an animal." Clay sounded so patient she wanted to hit him. "He needs subduing, preparing."

"I've never seen you treat an animal that way. If you want to question him, do it, but why are you so cruel?"

That smile curled Clay's lips again, the smile she was learning to hate. "It doesn't matter. We'll get it out of him." He reached across the table and took her hand. "Alix, we have to do this."

"Did you poison him?" The image of the syringe driving into Dev's arm haunted her.

Clay shook his head slowly, the stubble on his slight double chin rasping his shirt collar. "We just gave him something to keep him quiet. What did he mean, 'you told them?'"

She couldn't avoid his eyes, that quiet, compelling gaze, but whatever Dev thought, she wouldn't betray him. They could use that knowledge to kill him. "I don't know." She blinked, cast her eyes down, giving the impression she was embarrassed to say in front of everyone.

Clay understood at once, or thought he did. "Trying to trap you."

"Something like that."

"We need to know what kind of shapeshifter he is."

"How will you find out?"

He grinned. "All shapeshifters have to change to their other form at the full moon. We just have to wait. Once we see, we can take pictures. That's what the cameras are for. And we can start to convert him. It could be that regular doses of a drug will help, like giving insulin to diabetics. That might be all he needs to stay human. We could convert werewolves like that, perhaps stop them going into the killing rage they have when they change their forms."

"Perhaps he won't want to convert." Alix thought of the beauty of the animals, the grace of the big cats, the strength of the wolf and wondered if she would be prepared to give that up, if she had to.

The others laughed. "What, being a deviant? Who would want that?" It was clear Clay was speaking for all of them. "And now we have a live one, we're going to make the most of it. Find out what we can, circulate the information. You never know, if we can get a case together we might be able to present it to Congress. Make it official."

Alix didn't know if that would help. She wasn't sure what to think any more. It was clear Clay was doing his best to make things right in his world, as he saw it. A world she had done her best to conform with for most of her life. Now, meeting Dev, all the concepts and ideas she'd taken for granted whirled around her like leaves in Fall, and about as meaningful.

"We'll give him something he won't be able to resist. He'll tell us everything."

"What? What will you give him?"

"Something called cephalox. We came across it on the black market last year." Clay glanced around at his colleagues, preening in his cleverness. The six men and one other woman in the kitchen smiled and nodded, acknowledging his success. "We found a punk selling it, and we found out that one kid who bought it off him was one of them, a deviant. When we killed him, we found the stuff on him, labeled, no less, so we had it analyzed. It's their heroin, Alix. It's addictive. But we don't know what else it does, and we need to know. That's why we took Wyvern alive. It might be a weapon."

Alix pushed back her chair and took her plate to the sink, scraping it off in the waste disposal. "You promised me you wouldn't hurt him. I wouldn't have agreed to anything if you hadn't promised." She turned, plate in hand. "I'll never trust you again, Clay." With nothing in her mind but anger and bitter disappointment, she threw the plate at him.

He ducked, and the china burst into a thousand pieces on the tiled floor. Like her heart. Clay looked away. Somewhere inside Alix treasured the memory of her big brother, the man who had taken control of their lives at such a young age, making sure she got her education and a roof over her head, the man who had gone out to work at anything he could find so she got some kind of life. And now, she wondered if she never knew him at all.

Steve laughed. "Look, you let yourself get too close. It happens sometimes, but you'll get over it. I promise, Alix." He draped an arm around her shoulders and it made her feel tainted.

She'd forced herself to shake hands with the other four people in the room, although, like David Copperfield after being introduced to Uriah Heep, she wanted to wipe her hands afterwards. The girl belonged to Ivan, and had strident ideas of her own. Jonelle, her name was.

Alix couldn't cry, she mustn't. She had to think. This was the house she'd spent her early years in, but it had been transformed so that the kitchen was the only room she recognized. The bedrooms were fitted out with utilitarian furniture, the lounge was half library, half meeting room, cheap shelves stacked with books on the occult, especially vampires, werewolves and books on mythology. Some were heavily notated. A computer rested untidily on the corner of a desk. She had to get a grip.

She shook off Steve's arm and wandered through to the lounge, idly ambling around the shelves. She picked up a book on werewolves. Clay followed her. "You should read some of those. They'd tell you what you've been missing. There's a whole world behind ours, underneath it. They want what we've got."

"What's that?"

"Power, freedom." Loose words, words that were used carelessly by many people, with only a vague idea of their meaning.

"Can't they have that anyway?"

"They'll destroy our lives, Alix. They'll take it all and put us into slavery. They're stronger than we are, but there are ways we can fight back. And we have to fight back."

She put the book down and turned to face this man, who it turned out she hardly knew at all. "How? And why? Where's the proof they want to take over?"

Jonelle, who had followed Alix, laughed in derision, her voice harshly echoing in the undraped room. "It's all around you, if you know what to look for. We don't know how many of them there are, or what their plans are, but we have to find out. We're going to put this one through hell, find out what turns him off, what turns him on. He can't do anything in that silver cage. As long as he's there he's helpless."

Alix couldn't remember Dev telling her anything about silver, but she couldn't remember seeing him touch anything made of it, either. She didn't know enough. She'd been plunged into this world against her will; had spent years denying the powers she had that frightened her, taught to control and subdue them. Now was the time to find out exactly what she could do.

And what she couldn't.

Chapter Six

They gave Alix her things back, her phone, which they told her wouldn't work here, and her watch, which would. The cell had taken them two days ago, and this was the evening of the second day. They had given Dev a hefty dose of opiates, followed by this drug she'd never heard of, cephalox, which could well contain more opiates for all she knew. Her head was clearing nicely, but she thought Clay had probably administered less of the opiate to her than he had to Dev. After all, her waking up time wasn't critical, and until they got him into that cage, his unconsciousness was crucial to their plans.

She used her old bedroom, but if she hadn't looked out the window on to the familiar view outside, she wouldn't have known it. All the furniture she remembered had gone, packed away, in the Jersey City apartment, sold or in storage. Even the floor was bare except for a thin rug by the bed. The bed itself was a cheap divan, covered by a comforter. At least the sheets were clean.

Clay gave her a pair of Levis and a white t-shirt, but no clean underwear. Trust a man to forget that! So she took a moment to rinse out her panties and drape them on the cold radiator to dry as well as they could. She discarded her silk blouse and skirt, and her panty hose had long since disintegrated into holes. She never wanted to see them again. She knew the group regarded her warily, but she'd done her best to allay their suspicions. To admit she agreed with them would have made them sure she was lying, so she'd listened to the arguments and promised to think hard. But since she'd woken up in that cage and seen Dev's suffering she'd known for sure which side she was on.

She stared out at the night, stars sprinkled over the sky, looked at the view she'd woken up to for nearly twenty years. For the first time in years she forced herself to go over the events of the night her parents died.

It hurt, almost as much as it had the first time. They had been members of the PHR too. She and Clay had been out at a party, but they came home earlier than usual. They'd disturbed the burglars—or whatever they were.

Clay had gone in pursuit, chasing the intruders out the back door while Alix had seen to her parents, desperately trying to mop up the blood, stop the flow, anything, and called the ambulance.

The werewolves had torn her parents to pieces. Clay had sworn he'd seen the werewolves, racing off into the distance, too fast for him to catch them, and they went through the woods, over uneven ground so he couldn't have chased them by car. Since his parents were leaders of their cell, it was obvious why they'd been attacked.

She'd never questioned Clay's story. It would have brought back all the agony of that time; the anguish of seeing her parents' bodies torn apart, not being able to help them at all. Now she had to question it. Had he really seen werewolves? If he hadn't, what had he seen? And why had he lied, if he had actually lied?

She had to talk to Dev again. He was the only person who could give her answers. While she wouldn't necessarily believe him, any more than she'd believe her brother, she needed to talk to him.

She only remembered the existence of the cameras after she'd left her room. They probably worked the same way as the ones in the shop, but if she switched them off, there would be questions come morning. So she made her way down to the basement, careful not to tread on the squeaky stairs, or the loose boards in the hall. When she stopped to

listen, nobody stirred. There might be someone downstairs, watching over Dev, but she'd cope with that when she got there. A plan formed in her mind.

She found the switch that controlled all the electricity and pulled it into the up position. Everything went off. The small light over her head, and presumably the lights in the cage. A power cut. She slipped into the unused coal cellar, now bare and clean, and waited for a reaction. After ten of the longest minutes of her life, nothing happened, she flicked on the torch she'd swiped on her way through the kitchen. Nobody was coming. If she'd heard anything, she would have restored the electricity and hidden here, returning to her room afterwards. It was a country area. With any luck, they'd call it a local power cut.

Shelves lined the brick walls of the cellar, filled with boxes. Alix caught her breath. She was no expert, but she knew bomb-making equipment when she saw it. Even brief mentions of the ingredients on the news reports made her aware that you could do more with fertilizer and gas than enrich dirt and drive cars. And boxes of medical equipment too. This must be where they stored that drug Clay told her about. An open pack of sealed syringes caught her attention, their plastic containers gleaming in the light from her torch. She opened a plain white cardboard pack nearby and rows of vials met her gaze. Nothing was labeled. She had no way of knowing what the stuff was, but she grabbed a couple of vials from the box, then closed it and put it at the bottom of the pile. Someone would know.

Cautiously she crept out of the room and into the large cellar where they had put the cage.

Movement from the center told her Dev was awake, even before she shone the thin light between the silver bars. "It's me," she whispered.

"I know." His voice sounded clear and sure. Calm, even.

"Dev, are you a monster? A shapeshifter?"

He laughed, a harsh bark with no humor about it at all. "You don't get me twice that way, lady. I let it slip when I thought you were in danger. I should have known better. Is this a set-up too?"

"I didn't know if you were awake, but I had to find out a few things. I don't know what to think any more." She knew she didn't belong with the PHR, but did that mean she had to join the shapeshifter community instead?

"Well that's a start."

By the faint light, she saw him. His tie was gone, probably taken while they were asleep. He sat in the middle of the cage, his legs drawn up, cheek resting on his knees. He still wore the white shirt and dark trousers of his suit, but the trousers had a couple of tears in them, and the shirt wasn't pristine any more. Neither was his face. His cheek was torn and bloody, and when he turned his face to her, she saw the way one side of his face was swollen, the flesh purpled and shiny, covering his eye.

"What did they do to you?"

He moistened his lips, the lower one split open painfully. "What do you think? Smashed my glasses into my face. Kicked me about a bit. Did you expect them to treat me kindly?"

She swallowed. "Is anything badly hurt?"

He shrugged and winced. "One arm is broken. I felt the bone snap when they bent it behind me."

"Oh God!"

"I can't blame you for that part. Did you tell them about me? Can I expect my head

to be brandished on a pole before the Senate any time soon?"

She couldn't bear his mocking tone, wondered how he had the strength. "They have a drug they want to test on you. Cepha—"

"Cephalox?" His voice sharpened. "They have that? Where did they get it?"

"On the black market, they said. They want to wait until you have to change into your other form, to prove you are what they think, then they'll give you the drug and see what happens."

"Don't they know?"

"They think it will stop you changing."

"If anything would, that stuff will." He paused and reached for the tin cup near him with his good hand. The other hung uselessly to the ground. Tears filled her eyes, but she blinked them away, watching him drink.

"I thought they gave you an opiate again, or that cephalox stuff."

He grinned, and she saw his teeth. Two at the front were broken, jagged shards. "They gave me a barbiturate. That doesn't have any effect on me, though I let them think it did. Will you tell them that as well?"

He was trusting her again. She shook her head. "I want to think, or at least I wanted to. Now I know what I have to do. You'll die if you stay here much longer. I can't let that happen, Dev, I have to get you out of here."

"Maybe." He watched her, his eyes dark in the faint light. "We have company, you know."

Startled, Alix flashed her torch around the room and saw Steve, sitting in a chair, slumped down, his chest rising and falling rhythmically. She took a step back, but Dev said, "He won't wake up for a while. Some of the barbiturate must have found its way into his coffee."

How had he managed that? Panic spiked inside her, but she quelled it. She'd spent too long ignoring what was happening. "I don't want my brother to kill you," she said. "I'll help you if you promise not to hurt him or his friends."

Dev shook his head, and winced. She winced with him. Was there anywhere it didn't hurt? "No," he whispered. "There is nowhere." He was reading her mind. "And I can't promise not to hurt anyone. I need to get out of here, Alix. For myself and for my people. Can you help me?"

She nodded. "I have to. I got you into it, I have to help you out. Are you a shapeshifter?"

"What do you think?"

He still didn't trust her completely. She couldn't blame him. "Where will you go?"

"Away. Listen, Alix, there is a number you can call—"

Steve groaned. Dev cursed and turned his attention to him. For a brief moment, Alix felt raw power surge through the room. It softened and became gentle, persuasive. She wanted to sleep, she closed her eyes...

"No!" His sharp command jolted her awake. "Not you, Alix. Wake up."

"You can do that with your mind?"

"As long as they don't feed me opiates, yes. Why do you think they changed the drug?"

"They probably ran out of them. They were the pills my mother used to take, so there couldn't have been many left. But there's a room here with all kinds of vials. I took two."

"Good girl!" For the first time since she'd entered the cellar, his voice warmed. "Tomorrow, when they come back, come with them. You hear me?"

"Yes. Yes, all right."

"Now go. Put the lights back on and go."

She went.

"He's not so sure of himself now."

Clay set a cup of coffee in front of his sister. "Bit of damage, but he's still alive. Out for the count, though. We must have given him more than we thought."

"How do you know he's still alive?"

Steve grinned briefly. "Kicked him awake first thing. He's still with us."

Louis, a biker type with long red hair grinned. "Better lay off him a bit. We don't want to kill him."

"My thoughts exactly," Clay said. "I've put some stuff in his breakfast. When he's asleep we'll go in and set his arm." He glanced at Alix. "He fell on it, and it broke."

That wasn't what she'd heard, but she didn't question the statement, only allowed her distress to show. "Can I see him?" They knew she was soft-hearted, they would expect that.

Clay glanced at Steve. "I guess so. But stay on the other side of the bars."

"I can't believe you think you've got a shapeshifter, just because he said so. You might be making a terrible mistake."

Clay shrugged and shared another meaningful glance with Steve. "You know how it goes, babe. If we're wrong, we'll have to get rid of him. Make it look like an accident."

"Clay, you said he'd be safe!"

Her brother took a deep draught of coffee. "Can't be helped, darling. He fought back yesterday and ended up a bit bruised. No chance he'll join us, and he knows too much. He's a casualty of war, baby."

Alix pushed her plate away. "You can't do this!"

"Darlin' this is a breakthrough." Steve moved to the table and put his hand over hers. "You gotta see that. When we get our proof, we can go to Congress, get this all put on the agenda. Then they'll be put down anyway. They're not human, princess. They're scum, less than nothing."

"Why do you say that?" Surging up from the table Alix found it hard not to explode in anger. But she needed to go down to the cellar this morning. He could be seriously injured, bleeding inside, anything. She couldn't condone killing, and she wouldn't, whatever it took.

She no longer cared if he was a shapeshifter, or just a man with psychic gifts. It didn't matter. How to get him away was all that concerned her now. That arm needed attention. There were cars outside, vehicles they could steal if they had to and then she could get him to a hospital.

What happened after that she couldn't imagine. Her life was gone, blown away by these events.

Leaving Jonelle upstairs, the others went down to the cellar after breakfast. Ivan sat in the chair where Steve had been dozing last night, but he stood up when they arrived. "He's asleep," he said, motioning to the cage.

Under the painfully bright lights, Dev lay sprawled on the floor, half covered by a blanket. He faced towards them, the broken half of his face in shadow, a heavy lock of hair

falling over his forehead. His left arm, the broken one, draped over his chest, cradled by the other arm. Alix found it difficult to imagine how much pain he must be in.

Are you there?

His voice sounded sharp and clear in her head.

Yes. No time to deny him now.

Follow them into the cage. Come in with them.

Clay unlocked the padlock and put the key in his pocket. He glanced behind him to where Steve held a bar, like the ones that ringed the cage, gleaming with a bright intensity. Silver.

Does silver hold you?

You're about to find out.

No longer torn between her brother and Dev, she followed Clay and Steve into the cage. When she felt Ivan's hand on her shoulder, trying to pull her back, she shook him off. "I can't see him suffer like that. I have to help make him comfortable."

Clay had grabbed a white box and a wooden rod, which he probably planned to use as a splint. Not a bad idea. The box probably held first aid equipment and bandages. There was over a week to the next full moon, and they wanted to keep him alive until then. If the bone had pierced the skin, she would be able to argue that they needed to find antibiotics, perhaps even get him to a hospital.

Dev lay still. She felt his tension as if it was her own. A click made her look towards Clay, who held a wicked looking handgun. He'd clicked off the safety catch.

Her attention back on Dev, she circled him, watching. Steve rolled him on his back, none too gently. She felt his pain when the arm thumped on the hard floor, and nearly cried out, but bit the inside of her lip, hard, to stop any sound escaping her lips.

What happened next was so fast that had she blinked she might have missed it. But in one smooth movement Dev stood, Steve locked to him with his good arm, his other arm at his side. His lips curled back in a snarl and he jerked his head at the camera. "Turn that off."

Clay blinked. He held his firearm trained on the two, but he couldn't shoot Dev without hurting Steve, who stood as if paralyzed in Dev's tight hold, not attempting to struggle or break free. "Turn what off?"

"The camera."

"I can't."

Dev's snarl increased. "How many are there?"

"Three." What good would it do Dev to know that?

Dev closed his eyes. Steve seemed to wake up. He struggled, tried to get away but seemingly without effort, Dev increased his grip.

The cameras shattered with an explosion of glass and Dev opened his eyes.

Clay shot him and yelled, "Alix, get down!" at the same time.

Alix dropped to the floor and heard a man scream. When she regained her focus, she saw Steve, blood pouring from a shoulder wound, slumped on the floor and Dev's free hand clapped to his side. "Bastard!" he gasped and then he shifted.

Now it was their turn to scream.

The rags Dev wore ripped off his body, as it grew and expanded. Black, scaly skin exploded through the seams. His face elongated, his nose growing and transforming into a snout, his eyes enlarged and turned into a wicked red color. Arms and legs grew huge, strong legs supported the heavy body.

And his arms turned into wings. Wide, scaly, stretching high until he folded them in

to his body.

Slowly, the beast turned his head and found Alix.

Stand up.

She got to her feet, her knees trembling so much she had difficulty staying upright. A crash exploded from Clay's weapon, but it seemed to bounce off the hard, scaly skin. Dev ignored it, but lifted one leg and reached for her. She didn't have to hide her terror. He opened his mouth and a long, red tongue curled out momentarily, as though tasting the air.

Claws closed around her waist and she went to him.

Don't be afraid. I'm going to shift back in a moment, when most of my hurts have gone. I had no choice. That shot would have killed me if I'd stayed human.

"Jesus, I wish I had a camera." Clay stood up. He took a step around Dev, staring up at him. Dev must be at least seven feet high in this form.

Dev curled his barbed tail carefully around Alix, but left the barb free, pointing at Clay.

"What are you? You can't get out, you know that. This cage is silver." Clay raised his voice. "Close the door, Ivan."

They heard the clang and the rattle of the chain, but before Steve could click the padlock into place Dev extended one arm. Without taking a step, he shoved the door open, and then he pulled his arm back.

How did you do that?

We can change our size as we need to. You are my hostage, Alix. You're coming with me.

He felt warm, despite the scaly skin. Alix stood still, transfixed until something flashed. A camera.

Quicker than he'd transformed into the beast, Dev changed back. A strange sliding sensation, then she looked down and saw his arm locked around her. His bare arm. He nodded to Clay. "Now you know."

"Oh yeah." Clay licked his lips. "We have got you now, man."

"You've got nothing. A faked photograph." Dev's voice came clear and strong. Alix twisted in his grip and saw him smile at her. No broken teeth. His face was dirty, but unmarked. How had that happened?

"What are you?"

"A man."

"Some man! You can't get out you know. This cage is silver."

She felt him shrug. "It must have cost you some."

Holding Alix between himself and Clay, Dev moved over to the door. She didn't resist. "If I hadn't moved, your friend there would have had more than a grazed shoulder. This time," he said quietly. "If you shoot, you shoot your sister. Can you live with that?"

Clay bared his teeth, as though he was the animal. "I'll get you for this. You needn't think you'll get away." He blinked, and Alix saw his anguish. Despite everything he'd done, Clay was still her brother, and she still loved him. "I'll get you back safe, baby." When he turned his gaze to Dev all softness had gone. "Hurt her and you die." Dev didn't reply.

When they reached the bars of the cage Dev reached out and swung the door open, the chain rattling to the floor. The gasps were easily audible. Dev pushed Alix out first, but followed immediately after, curving one arm around her waist and holding her tightly.

"You shouldn't believe everything you read." Before anyone could react, he swung around and kicked up, knocking the gun out of Ivan's grip. Grabbing Alix's hand, he raced

to the stairs. "Lead the way," he ordered, and she was glad to do so. He paused to slide closed the bolts on the door at the top, and then raced after her.

When they entered the kitchen, Jonelle gaped for the brief moment it took for Dev to disarm her with an expertise rarely seen in an antiques expert. One swift slice of his hand and it was done. Jonelle's weapon fell to the ground. Dev snatched it up and after one swift glance around the room headed for the computer standing on a cheap table in the corner of the room.

No time for screwdrivers and careful study. Alix gasped when she saw claws extend from Dev's fingers, which he used to rip the side panel away. He shoved his hand inside and dragged out a panel, assessing it briefly before he grunted in satisfaction. He turned back to Alix. "Come on."

He didn't give her a chance to protest, grabbing her hand and dragging her out of the warm kitchen into the chilly night. He headed for the cars.

"You can't go anywhere like that!" she gasped.

"Like what?"

"You're naked!"

He gave her a one sided smile. "So I am. It's not worth dressing. My own clothes are rags, and there's no time to search for more. You want me to ransack the bedrooms? Come on, they'll be through that door any minute."

She had no choice but to follow. A man who spent his life studying beautiful works of art shouldn't be able to hot wire a car so effectively, but the yellow SUV started up after only one cough. He glanced at where she sat in the seat next to him. "Buckle up, sweetheart, this might be a bit rough."

It was. Dev didn't even try to find the road, but set off cross country, bouncing across the field behind the house until he eventually hit the small track leading to the highway. Once they hit the smoother road service Alix could speak again. "Do you know where you're going?"

He flashed her another grin and she saw his eyes, not moss green as usual, but glowing red. "No. But at least I can see where I'm going. With my glasses destroyed, I have to keep my eyes in the wyvern state." It made him demonic in appearance. Alix took deep breaths to stop her rising panic. After a few minutes it worked, and her mind started working logically again. So he really needed his glasses in his human form, but not as a wyvern. A comical image of a dragon wearing glasses flashed into her mind and for a moment out of time, she found she could still smile.

The lights by the side of the road flashed into the car and Alix caught her breath. "You're hurt."

"You saw them shoot me." A thin trickle of blood oozed down his chest from the wound in his shoulder. "The arm's not completely healed, either. I had to shift to save my life, but I didn't do it long enough to really heal these marks."

"We have to stop and see to you."

"And how do we do that? No, Alix, just hang on. You're coming with me, you have no choice." He floored the accelerator pedal, and they shot up the highway. "Time to make up your mind, darling."

"What?"

"Tell me now. Which side are you on?" He glanced in the rear view mirror. "I can take you in, and you can listen to what we have to say, or you can stay with the PHR. Your choice. I know you've been uncomfortable with your brother's activities for the past few

years, and so are we. I also know you're Talented. You don't have to join us, but you do have to leave the organization. If you decide to stay with your brother, I'll still take you in, but as my prisoner. You won't be mistreated, I swear, but we will question you. If you want to hear our side, come in as my guest."

"And what's the difference?"

"You won't be treated as a hostile."

She bit her lip, trying to understand what he was telling her. "Who's we?"

He glanced at her before turning his attention back to the road. "Other Talents. There are lots of us, Alix, including your own people, the Nadasdys. Do you know anything about them?"

"No."

He slowed down to a legal speed, glancing down the side roads either side of the highway. "We'll tell you, perhaps introduce you to some of your relatives. The Nadasdys are from an ancient Hungarian family, carrying a particular genetic make-up. They're like you, Alix."

"I have relatives?" Wonder filled her heart, and a warmth to think she might not be all alone. Her grandmother had come from Hungary after the 1956 uprising, but she'd never met any of her relatives on that side of the family, and hadn't been encouraged to talk about them.

His smile was less strained now. "Yes, you do. So what's your decision? Whatever you decide, you won't be hurt, you have my word on it."

She didn't have to think. After what they had done to Dev, she couldn't condone or ignore the activities of her brother any more. "I'm with you, at least for now. I have to be. But I won't do anything that will lead to you hurting Clay. He's my brother, Dev."

"I wouldn't ask you to, and I'll support you in your decision if they ask you to do that. Are you sure? Be sure, Alix. You can't go back."

"Yes." It was time. Time to move on completely, to take her own life away from its shadowy beginnings.

"Okay. Hold on." He eased the car to the side of the road, and slid off the highway into a small grove of trees before he came to a halt. "It's a shame the car's such a bright color, they're bound to spot it, if they're looking. It might even have a tracking device."

"I don't know if they do that."

"My lot certainly do." He held out his arm and opened the car door so the internal light came on. On the inside of his wrist she saw a shadow, a small, square shaped mark that looked like a bruise. "It's a tracking device," he explained. "Obviously it didn't work. So much for technology."

He unbuckled his belt, hit the button on hers, grabbed the hard drive purloined from the computer at the farmhouse and got out the car. "Come on. We're going the rest of the way in by air. Have you got those vials?"

"What? Yes, but..." She got out of the car, staring at Dev. He was tired, shadows under his eyes joining the fading bruises on his face, and he held one arm carefully by his side. The hole left by the bullet was on his upper shoulder, dripping blood slowly, but surely. "We have to patch you up and get you somewhere safe."

He dragged his good arm across his eyes. "That's what I plan. I'm going to shift again. I need to, so I can heal. You are going to ride on my back all the way home. Alix, I'm going to shift to my true size. I'm a bit bigger than you might think, so don't be alarmed. Here, look after this."

She took the hard drive. *Don't be alarmed?* She was terrified. The creature he'd become reminded her of the teachings she'd had all her life, that these things were sinister and wrong. Added to that was the shock of seeing the change, the limbs elongating, the skin changing in color and texture. She watched, unable to do anything else. She couldn't have run if she wanted to.

All through the shift, Dev held firm in her mind. He didn't say anything, but she felt his presence, sending waves of reassurance through her. The whole thing was mind-boggling, but she had to go with it, question as little as possible until the reality got through to her. She wanted to talk, but there was no time.

He was huge. Standing by the side of the road was a twenty foot dragon.

Not dragon, wyvern. Climb aboard.

How?

He extended a wing, dropping the tip to the floor. *Climb up here, sit between my wings and put your arms around my neck. You'll be safest if you lie prone along my spine.*

What if I fall? You don't have seat belts.

His chuckle rumbled through her mind. *If you want, look in the car. Find a strap, a piece of rope or something and loop it around my neck.*

She definitely preferred that idea.

In the back of the SUV, she found a length of blue nylon rope. She didn't bother to cut it, but tied a knot to make it a continuous loop. Then she put a slip knot into it.

She felt his smile, and he bowed his head. This close, she stared into his eyes. Red eyes suited him in this form. They no longer seemed demonic, but a glowing contrast to the black scaly skin. It was softer on his front, she noticed, shades of grey shading from the black. Soft enough to stroke, nearly.

He chuckled in her mind while she slipped the loop over his head. *I think I'd like you to stroke me. In fact, I know it. Another time. Climb up now.*

Alix walked around to his outstretched wing and carefully climbed up, using the slim bones as a ladder. At the top she took a breath and swung her leg over, dragging her body to lie on her stomach along his spine, as he'd suggested. She lifted the blue loop with the slip knot and slid under, pulling it tighter. "I'm ready."

He rumbled acknowledgement, the vibration purring through his body and resonating through hers. *Hold tight.*

The ascent was the smoothest she'd ever known, smoother than the best pilot could ever achieve. His wings beat softly either side of her, sending currents of wind past them. She closed her eyes, finding the rhythm he used to fly almost soothing to her agitated soul.

Are you afraid of heights?

Not particularly.

Then open your eyes and look around.

Alix squeezed her eyes tightly shut and then let them spring open.

At first all she saw was his head before her, but he lowered it, and she saw the world, spread out below them like a living panorama. "Wow!"

Like it?

Oh yeah. The view went a long way towards alleviating her feelings of insecurity, loss and bitter anger, mostly against Clay. She wouldn't think of that now. Lights twinkled below, and she watched as before her the lights increased, became luminescent against the dark sky.

You can see the big cities for miles around. We're flying below the flight paths, so we don't alert the radar screens.

Won't somebody see us?

No. I fuzzed the air around us. That's why no-one saw me when I shifted. Only the Talented will see us, I can't stop that. But ordinary people will see a shadow, that's all.

What if you were a bright color? Gold, or something like that?

Still a shadow. I'm a black wyvern, but there is a rarer kind, a white version. They can fuzz the same as I can.

Rarer? How many of them are there?

Another chuckle. I don't know. There aren't many of us black wyverns, fewer of the white kind.

Was she going completely mad? Riding on the back of a giant dragon-wyvern, chatting to him telepathically and relishing the experience?

New York was stunning at night, the lights twinkling and flashing, different colors and patterns depicting the tourist buildings, the office blocks lit up with bright white sparks, showing where people were working late. She wanted to go lower, but she knew they couldn't.

Another night, perhaps. Would you like that?

Alix said *yes* before she really thought things out, then she knew it was what she really wanted. Exhausted and stressed as she was, she could still enjoy this, appreciate it as a magical moment out of time.

The ride was over all too soon. Dev drifted down, and landed in a dark alley. She watched him grow smaller, marveling at the new world she'd stumbled into. Wondering how much was hidden from view, how many times she'd not noticed a dragon in the sky.

I'm trusting you now, Dev said, fixing her with his burning stare. I'm staying at the Timothy. You know it?

Alix nodded. It was one of New York's finest hotels, situated a couple of blocks away from this alley.

I'll find my own way to my room. You go there and ask for me. Room seven-twenty three. I'll tell you to come up. Will you do that, or will you run?

"Where would I run?" She gave a derisory laugh. She was all out of options, and almost too tired to think. "I'll be there."

She took her time, giving him a chance to get in his room and settled. The Upper East Side was relatively safe, and after what she'd done in the last few days, she felt stronger than ever. Not that she did anything as stupid as leaving the well-lit areas, or walking close to the darkened doorways she passed.

The Timothy was an excellent hotel, but not one that housed a lot of high profile clients. Perfect for an art dealer who happened to be a dragon on the side.

The perfectly tasteful lobby was decorated in shades of beige, elegantly discreet, a glimpse of a comfortable upholstered sofa in a public lounge just in view. Alix ignored the contemptuous looks the uniformed man at the door gave her and swept past.

When she asked for Dev, she saw comprehension in the desk clerk's stare, and wished she hadn't. Deverell Wyvern, playboy, getting room service. She wondered if the hotel provided its own in-house entertainment for the discerning customer. Many did, although they strenuously denied it if they were found out.

Now she'd joined the sisterhood, or at least the desk clerk thought so. There was nothing she could do to alter his perception, but his assumption made her feel cheap, worthless. He lifted the phone and spoke into it, then took his time putting the instrument back in its cradle before turning to her. "He says you may go right up. Don't forget to ask for a tip." He gave her a conspiratorial grin. "If you come back, ask for me, Long John."

She bit back her retort with difficulty, but walked to the elevators and took the ride up in silence. The lift was half mirrors, and she couldn't avoid the sight of her tousled hair, grubby t-shirt and jeans. She wondered what kind of man would be attracted by someone like her, but the desk clerk had obviously leapt to that conclusion.

The room was close to the elevator, and it opened on her knock. Dev opened it, unshaven, as grubby as she was, clad in a hotel toweling bathrobe, wearing a new pair of glasses and the most welcome sight she'd ever seen. They stared at each other, and a smile quirked his mouth before he reached out and pulled her into his arms.

They both needed it, this contact, the solace of just holding each other. Alix heard the door thump closed behind her, but the sense of relief flooding her was too strong to resist, even had she wanted to. His arms closed around her with a finality she welcomed. She felt as though she'd come home after a long journey, and only when he released her did she begin to wonder why she felt that way.

When he loosened his hold, he didn't release her completely. "You'll have a lot of questions. Don't ask them yet." He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "We'll order room service and then rest. I'll make a couple of phone calls."

"Shouldn't you check out? They'll know where to find you."

"We're safe here, I promise."

"How?"

The corners of his mouth tilted up very slightly. "Questions, you see? I'll answer them all in a while. Now go in the shower and get clean. I'll order while you're in there. Is there anything you prefer?"

It was her turn to smile, but wryly. "If I thought it would do any good, I'd say a bottle of Scotch and I don't drink an awful lot."

"It'd make you ill. Go and shower."

He pushed her towards the open door of the bathroom. She turned. "What...?"

He wouldn't let her finish. "Comfort first, questions afterwards." She gave in and went into the bathroom. The shower beckoned her too strongly for her to resist.

Chapter Seven

When Alix came out of the shower, Dev went in. Wrapped in another hotel bathrobe, she switched on the TV and was vaguely amazed to discover nothing about their recent activities on the news reports. It had taken over her life, changed it completely and nobody knew. Well, almost nobody.

Dev must have taken a quick, efficient shower, for by the time room service arrived, he was out of the bathroom, freshly shaved and clean. He answered the door and watched the boy wheel the cart inside the bedroom. The boy shot a glance at Alix, sitting on the sofa by the window, clad only in the hotel's bathrobe.

Dev didn't miss the contemptuousness of the look. "If you want your tip, you'll treat the lady with respect."

The boy straightened, and glanced at Alix again, but this time his expression was carefully neutral. "Of course, sir." He left after receiving his tip.

"I'm sorry, I should have thought how it would look, you arriving so late, alone and asking for me." Dev strolled to the cart and picked up a sandwich. "I ordered chicken on rye, and a few more adventurous things. I don't really know what you like. I have a lot of things to learn about you."

"Why would you bother?" Her reply was instinctive, but right. He'd made it clear their lives lay on different paths. That, at least, hadn't changed.

He paused to finish his mouthful and pushed the trolley closer to the sofa, so she could reach it without getting to her feet. "I want to know you, Alix. You're about to take a new path to your life, and I want to be your friend, help you if I can." He took another bite, with his now perfectly clean, perfectly shaped teeth, watching her carefully.

"I-I don't know. Everything's changed, but I don't know how. I don't know what I'm going to do now. All my money's tied up in the shop and the apartment, but that's shared with Clay. And you say I have a gift, a talent." She picked up a sandwich, more to avoid his reaction than because she was hungry.

"Hey." The sofa depressed when he sat next to her, and touched her arm. "You'll be okay. I don't know if we're past the worst, because I don't know what's to come, but we can rest for tonight. We're safe here."

"How do you know?"

He leaned forward, elbows propped on his knees. "I called someone while you were in the shower. We're protected now."

"Who did you call?"

"A man called Cristos. You'll meet him tomorrow. There's a man outside this door, making sure we can rest without danger. One outside in the street, too."

She swallowed. "I've really closed the door on my old life, haven't I?"

He reached out and took her hand. "Perhaps you've opened a new one. Don't think of it now."

"Just tell me what you've planned."

He smoothed his thumb over her palm. "I'll take you to meet Cristos tomorrow, and we'll contact some of the other Nadasdys. From what I know of them, they'll welcome you into the clan. I should have known the moment I saw you."

"Known what?"

"Where you came from. You have the face of a Nadasdy."

She laughed, for the first time in days. "What on earth does that mean?"

"Beautiful inviting mouth, cheekbones so high and sharp you could slice paper on them, and those delicate, uptilted eyes." He watched her, his dark eyes intent on her face. In anyone else she would feel uncomfortable at such a concentrated stare, but his regard was so frank, so honest, she was comfortable with it. She had nothing to hide from him. He'd been in her head, and in her body. Nobody had ever been so close to her. It was strange, realizing this just now, especially since they had known each other for so short a time.

"This hotel isn't safe any more, not in the long term. The protection is just for tonight. I'm taking you in, Alix."

"Where?"

"Cristos wants you in the Department, where he can take care of you. You need to develop your Talent, not hide it, or you'll eventually collapse from the strain of not using it, or be exploited by someone who wants to use your gifts for himself. He's going to try to get a Nadasdy in tomorrow, if he can, one of your own."

She gasped. All that, so soon? "What about the shop, the apartment, my things?"

"Make a list of what you want to keep, and we'll send someone around for them. You can't go back. I've ordered some clothes for you, but you can choose some more later. That should be fun." He smiled and lifted her hand to kiss her fingers.

Her eyes filled with tears. "I can't believe Clay would want to hurt me."

"After the last few days? He might not want to hurt you, but his colleagues certainly do. Even though you left as my hostage, they'll suspect you. No, until this is over, you can't go home."

Her confusion threatened to overwhelm her. "How can my world change so much in so short a time? I thought I'd have more time to get used to things. I guess my time's run out."

"Just meet them and see what you think. I won't let anyone persuade you to do something you don't want, or to push you into any decision you're not ready to take."

She bit her lip. "Okay." Her stomach growled.

Reminded of the food, she picked up another sandwich. Now the immediate danger was over her body clicked back into its normal mode, and she rediscovered the appetite that had left her for the last few days. They ate in companionable silence until Dev reached for the bottle in the ice bucket. Champagne.

"Why did you order that?" she asked, her voice quiet. "You think I have something to celebrate?"

"Only escaping with our lives." Efficiently he divested the bottle of its cork with a slight pop and no loss of the precious liquid inside. "No, I thought it might relax us enough to sleep." He turned to her, glass in hand. "And I hoped to cheer you up a little. I know how you must feel, Alix. You've lost your brother today, and the life you've known up to now. I wouldn't be so crass as to offer you a celebration."

She couldn't say anything to that, except to take the glass and sip appreciatively at the contents. "It's very good."

"I do know my way around champagne and wine," he confessed, taking a swig from his glass. "One of the requirements of a society escort."

She frowned. "After the last few days I know there must be something more to that Deb's Delight thing."

"Why?" He reached for the bottle and refilled his glass, but she wasn't yet ready for

another.

"Well, for a start, I thought you'd rather remain anonymous, being as you're a-a "

"Wyvern," he said helpfully.

She gave him a darkling look. "Yes. And from what I've learned about you, you're more than a playboy, much more."

"Thank you for that." He picked up another sandwich, but didn't take a bite, instead he stared at it as though his answer lay in the soft bread. "Yes, there are a few things." He put down the sandwich, untasted and turned to her, taking her free hand in his. "You do have a right to know more about me, now you've decided what side you're on. Ask me what you like." A smile quirked the corner of his mouth. "I'm a wyvern, a kind of dragon. I can shift from one form to the other at will, and I have to shift at least once a month, at the full moon. There's no madness involved. I can convert someone to be like me, if I find someone willing. There's a sign, something I can look for. But there's an old saying about having to kiss a lot of frogs before you find your prince. It's the same for wyverns. Compatible partners are rare."

"Do you have to have one?"

He shook his head no. "I wanted one once. Until fairly recently, I thought it was vital. You see, we're a little longer lived than humans."

"How little?"

He paused, looking down to where he stroked her palm with this thumb. "Our natural lifespan is about five hundred years. Sometimes longer."

"What?" Dread clutched at her heart. "How old are you?"

He lifted his eyes to meet her gaze. So cold, she had no idea gold flecked green could be so cold. "Ninety. I'm ninety years old."

Alix's first instinct was to snatch her hand from his, but after the first, instinctive tug, she let it remain in his clasp. "How is that possible?"

"We're different, Alix."

She gave a shaky laugh. "You can say that again!" She stared at his face, looking for wrinkles, any sign of age. "You don't look a day over thirty."

His mouth quirked up in a slight grin. "We age much slower. My father loved and lost twice before he met my mother. She was the first compatible female he met in three hundred years."

"Have you loved?"

He didn't flinch. "Yes. Once. She wasn't compatible, that is, I couldn't convert her. I married her, and she died."

"Oh God!"

He met her gaze steadily. "It was a long time ago, Alix. She died nearly thirty years ago. Ten years after her death, I met someone else, another shape-shifter. We married, but it didn't last long. Just because you're the same species, doesn't make you perfect partners. I learned that, too."

She felt like Alice, stepping into a world with different rules. "How do you manage? I mean, how do you keep hidden, stop people—"

"We have various systems. My family is old, and we add a few new members every so often. I have a mythical set of relatives, younger than I am. If I need to, I can take their place and when this lifespan nears its end, I'll probably become one of my mythical cousins or nephews. That way I can keep all my possessions. Will them to myself. They have their National Insurance numbers, their birth certificates, everything we need to take on their

identity. Some people move and begin again somewhere else. In every country, there are places we can go to get a new identity. We have medical centers, some in hospitals, some private clinics, because our metabolism is different. If I'm hurt, there's a number on my cell phone which will call a special paramedic, one who knows what I am."

"Dear God, Clay would kill for that information. And you're just telling me? Aren't you afraid I'll go tell him?"

He shook his head, smiling. "I've been inside your head, Alix. You won't betray me now, or anyone of my kind. You have far too much in common with us to do that." He paused, and picked up his glass with his free hand. "And too much honor."

She watched him drink, his throat rippling as the cool liquid went down. She'd thought she couldn't be surprised any more, not after seeing a man turn into a dragon. She was wrong. "So if you're so big and bad and invincible, why aren't you ruling the world?"

He put down his empty glass. "Because we don't want to. Why should we? It's an imperative which drives the human race, but not every species of human has that instinct. It's one of the things that makes the seemingly weaker Homo Sapiens rulers of the earth."

"What's the other?"

"You're prolific. You can have many children. The longer lived species aren't so fruitful."

That made sense. At least there was something she could accept without her mind boggling any further. She sipped her drink in silence and allowed him to refill it along with his. He was right. Although it wasn't a time for celebration, the champagne was cool, soothing and not too potent. It would help her to sleep. "You said there was a sign of compatibility."

His attention whipped back to her. "Yes."

The memory of a glowing dragon seared her mind, and she didn't have to say it aloud.

"Yes, Alix, that's it. When my birthmark heats like that, it's a sign I could, if we both wished it, convert you."

"To a dragon?"

"To a wyvern," he corrected her with a small smile. "Don't worry, there's no compulsion. Knowing your ancestry, I'm not entirely surprised you are compatible."

"But aren't I your one true mate or something?"

His gaze sharpened before he laughed. "You've been reading too many novels. No, there's no such thing as the one and only, although compatible partners are rare."

"What about your-wives?"

He sighed, and his thumb traced a small circular pattern on the palm of her hand. "Annie was sixty when she died, and I was sixty-five. We'd been married for thirty years. The other was a mistake, soon regretted, soon over."

"Do you miss her? Annie?"

His gaze was somber, but clearly honest. "I'll always miss her. I had a choice when she died. I could carry on, or die with her. I chose to live, although sometimes I wonder if I made the right choice." Silence fell for a moment, a silence Alix chose not to break. He turned to her. "You had to know, Alix. I'm not over her, I never will be over her, but I can live now, and not regret, not mourn every day. What Annie and I had was too good to have missed." He turned back, handing her glass to her, and she saw the bleakness in his eyes. "I could have chosen to die with Annie, but I was afraid." He swallowed.

Annie. That must have been his wife's name. Alix couldn't begin to imagine how it

must feel to be young, and to watch your chosen partner age and die.

"W-was she like me? Do I remind you of her, is that it?"

He smiled, his expression full of understanding and Alix hated herself for asking the question. It made her feel so stupid, so weak, for asking him. "No. You're not in the least like her. Do you want me to tell you about her? I think I should." Swallowing hard, Alix nodded.

He kept her gaze, didn't look away, but told her what she wanted, needed to know. "I was born in 1916, the second year of the Great War. I met Annie in 1936, as the world was readying itself for another war. We fell in love at once, but in those days you didn't defile a young woman without marriage. I wouldn't have wanted it any other way." His gaze gained a faraway look as he gazed into his own past. "She was small, blonde, a pixie of a woman. And very afraid. I told her what I was, and she left me." He paused, and she saw the echo of pain in her face. "She came back. She said she could bear it. We married and I was overjoyed, I wanted nothing more. But she refused to accept the wyvern part of me, refused to watch me shift, refused to accept my mark as anything but a tattoo. It took me some time to get used to it. She wasn't compatible. We never had to make a decision." He looked away from her, at the champagne glass, but she knew he wasn't seeing it. Tension filled the air and she caught her breath. "I decided to die with her. I found it fairly easy to age with her, take on all the signs of aging, although I'd never done it before. But when she died, I couldn't do it. I couldn't."

"Had you promised?" It was the first thought that came to her mind. To break a promise was a remnant from her childhood, something she'd been told never to do and something she held very highly.

"No." He looked at her again and the pain in his eyes made her flinch. "No, but I always intended to. She didn't tell me to, or hold me to it. She died of a heart condition, slowly, over years, and I could hardly bear it. I wanted to make her better, to do something, anything, to keep her with me a little longer. But she died, and I didn't." Blindly he stared at her, not seeing her at all, but a blonde woman he'd loved. "On her deathbed she made me promise to live. I kept the promise, although it nearly killed me at first. I mourned her for a long time, and I still miss her. I always will." His eyes begged her to understand, to accept him. "Shortly after her death, I did what all shifters have to do every sixty years or so. I changed identity. I'm my own great-nephew. Our family sets up false identities in every generation, people who don't actually exist, so there is always a new life to be taken." His voice quietened as he must have realized he was running on, nervousness taking over.

She understood. It was no more than anyone marrying a widower had to face. His devotion to Annie showed a side of him he'd never shown to anyone else, never demonstrated in this 'lifetime.' "You loved her. I might be jealous, but I could never take that from you. I never want to."

He reached for her hand, and squeezed it gently. "Is there no-one you loved?"

She blinked, forcing herself back to the here and now. "Yes, but I was mistaken."

"In what way?"

"He wanted someone else, not me. He wasn't in the PHR, which was one reason he appealed to me, and I really thought I loved him for a time."

He smiled. "You see? Time is relative, to a certain extent. We both loved and lost."

Looked at in that way, she saw his point. Tom hadn't been good for her, but there had been good times and he'd helped to make her independent, to think for herself instead

of accepting what others told her. "And you're willing to try again?"

He laughed and dropped her hand as though it was a hot coal. "Truly? I don't know." He turned back to the champagne and poured the last of it out, careful to distribute it evenly between the two glasses. "For a time I looked for it, even after my second marriage, but I changed my mind. I decided not to look, that it was easier to coast through life with a succession of girlfriends, but nobody special. I didn't want to have to watch someone age and die again and I thought if I had a lot of women, I wouldn't get involved with just one. I'm beginning to think I was fooling myself." He lifted his gaze to her face and the burning intensity she saw there made her catch her breath.

"Why are you telling me this?"

He gave her a wry grin and the intensity faded. "Because I've seen your secrets. I sneaked inside your head, something I hate to do, and I saw much more than I needed to. I've been feeling guilty about that, so this is by way of evening it up."

"Wow." Still reeling from what he'd told her, the wine added to her sense of disorientation. "And there's more to come?"

"Much more." He reached for her empty glass and quietly replaced it on the trolley. "But not tonight. Let's go to bed." He wasn't looking at her but he turned at her inner jolt. "I'll sleep here, on the sofa if you like. We just need to get some sleep."

"No, no, that would be stupid. This sofa's a small two-seater. You can't possibly get comfortable on it." On the other hand, the bed was Queen sized. Plenty of room for two. "As you say, we need to sleep."

He swallowed and seemed about to say something, but decided against it. Instead, he stood and pushed the trolley out the door. He paused to exchange a word with someone outside. Their guard. Alix disliked the idea of anyone knowing she was in here with Dev, but she told herself to get over it. They had to sleep, and they had to be safe.

He came back inside and stood looking at her. Not to be outdone, she stared back. Bruises that looked old and yellow marked his face, but they had only been inflicted the day before. He stood where he should have been lying in a hospital bed. Alix found it all hard to believe. She had never really believed all the stories Clay had told her, but now she had to imagine all that-and more.

"In my wyvern form, I heal," he said quietly. "It's natural to me and my kind. I'm sorry I had to do it without warning you, but I had no choice."

"I know. Don't tell me any more tonight, please. I don't think I can take any more."

"I know how you feel. I'm so sorry, Alix."

She stood up, brushing the tears from her eyes in what she hoped was a discreet gesture. Not so discreet, it seemed, for when she turned back, he was waiting for her.

She had no more defenses, nothing left in reserve. He took her in his arms, and she couldn't resist him but she fought her tears. There was no point. It wouldn't alter anything.

Still, it was soothing to rest on his shoulder, softly padded by his toweling robe. His arms enclosed her, not with desire, but with mutual comfort. He spoke, his words low, his lips against her hair. "Would you like a t-shirt or something to sleep in?"

That was kind, but she honestly didn't care. He'd seen all of her, and still wanted her, the only man she could remember who didn't criticize some part of her body. The knowledge was easement in itself. She shook her head, clearing her brain of the smothering miasma of sheer exhaustion.

Gently, he undid the belt holding her robe in place. He led her to the bed and threw

the covers back, before sliding the robe down her shoulders and throwing it over the sofa. He kept his attention on her face, but he slid his arms around her waist and urged her to sit on the bed. She lifted her legs and he drew the covers over her before walking around to the other side of the bed.

She tried not to look, she really did, but from the first time she'd met him his butt had attracted her, so when he drew off his own robe she did sneak a glimpse at him. He was fine, really fine. And once, he had wanted her. He slid into bed back first so she couldn't tell if he still wanted her.

He got into bed, rolled over and propped himself up on one elbow. There was at least a foot between them. Even in her exhausted state she felt a yearning, wanting to feel him, to touch him. And she knew she could trust him. If she said no, it would mean no, and he would accept it. Trust. Something she had used misguidedly in the past, but never again.

"I could put a pillow down the centre of the bed, if you like."

She grinned. "That would be a bit silly. Dev, I'm too tired to think for myself. I'm really tired, at my weakest. You can do what you want with me and I won't complain."

"You put me on my mettle. I can hardly do anything now you've said that, can I?" He smiled, a gentle, understanding smile that encompassed everything she'd been through. "I'd very much like to hold you, but if you don't want me to, I won't take offence."

"I'd like that too."

She was the first to move, sliding closer to him, but he lifted the covers so she could slip into his embrace. His arms folded her close, and she felt their body heat combine into comfortable warmth. No desire, neither were in any state to feel anything quite so energizing, but comfort, warmth and friendship in full measure.

Relationships had been made on less. Far less.

Chapter Eight

Alix woke up in Dev's arms. For a moment, everything was perfect. Sun streamed across the bottom of the bed through a crack in the drapes, in a late fall display of defiance against the winter. Just where their legs twined together, the sunlight streaked across the white cover. His chest moved with his gentle breathing, each movement tickling her breasts, in a motion just enough for pleasure, not enough for outright stimulation. All the way down their bodies they touched, warming companionship the order of the day.

When the memories returned, they did so in a flood, swamping the peace she'd woken up with, plunging her straight back into the maelstrom. She shuddered.

His arms tensed around her in a firm cinch.

She turned her head to look at him. "I didn't realize you were awake."

His eyes, hazy with sleep, blinked at her. "You woke me. What's wrong, *cariad*?"

"What's right?" She gave a short, shaky laugh. Either that or cry, and she was done crying.

He pressed a soft, damp kiss to her forehead. "I'll do my best to help you make it right."

"I blame myself. Once I left, and persuaded Clay to start again with the jewelry business I ignored it, did my best to pretend the PHR was just something Clay did in his spare time. But it isn't and it never was. The jewelry business was his hobby. So I not only have to face the fact that my brother is my enemy, but that there are creatures I never dreamed existed."

"Like me." His hands, warm on her body, his legs, entwined with hers. She found it hard to believe, but she'd seen it happen, seen him become another creature.

"Like you. To be honest, I thought my brother's stories were just that; stories. Oh, I knew about the telepathy, but not the rest. Shapeshifters, vampires and those kinds of creatures were in the storybooks for me. That's why I thought the PHR wasn't harming anyone, that it was a foolish waste of time. I was always convinced my parents were attacked by intruders with dogs." She paused, forcing herself not to relive that time. "But when I saw you shift, then I realized it was all real." She lifted her head and met his intent but unreadable gaze. "So Clay and his friends are hurting real people. Psi abilities are one thing. Many people have them in some form or another, but you-people doubt your existence!"

"With good reason." He offered no resistance when she withdrew, watching her draw away from him, but sadness entered his expression. "We don't like to advertise our presence. We've seen what being different can do to people. Through the centuries, we've been revered or persecuted, admired or feared when we've revealed our true natures. We don't want any of those things. We just want to be seen as ordinary people, as far as possible."

"Are you? People I mean?"

When he flinched, as though she'd struck him, she was sorry for her question but if she was ever to be completely comfortable with him, she had to ask it. "Yes, we are. There are different species of human. Leopards, lions and panthers are different, but they're all cats. Perhaps one day, we'll mix with humans and everyone will accept us, but that's far in the future. When society can't even accept people who have a different religion or skin color, what hope is there for us?"

"But you're stronger than us, you could make us do what you want."

He lifted himself up on his elbow and leaned his head on his hand, unconsciously displaying his smooth, muscled chest. "But why would we?"

His question bemused her. "Because you can?"

Gently, he reached out and pushed back a strand of her hair. "Darling, I can slice you from here—" he touched the base of her neck—"to the base of your belly without moving more than one finger." He drew his hand away and she watched, fascinated, as one long, black claw shot out the end of his finger. He watched her intently.

Cautiously she lifted her hand and touched the claw. Smooth, growing from the nail bed and covering his human nail, tapering to a razor sharp point.

"See?" he said softly. "I can't help what I am. If I revealed myself to the general public, I'd be a circus act, an oddity. There are already scientists who try to capture us, just to experiment on us. Your brother and his like want to kill us all." He reached out again and touched her throat, very, very gently. She shivered. "Shall I show you what a shapeshifter can do?" He touched her chin with his claw, tilted it up so she looked him straight in the eyes. "Do you want me, lovely girl, or is it all too much for you to take? I want you, very much. I'd like us to make love, then to shower together, and I'd like you not to be afraid of me and what I can do. But I can give you time, sweet. Now I have you safe."

Numbly, she shook her head. "Coming to terms with all this will take some time. I don't know what I want, Dev, not any more." Balanced on that claw, which could slice off her face without much effort, she felt no fear. She trusted him. That was a good start, perhaps the best. "I don't like feeling so helpless, or so lost."

"You have powers of your own, powers you're only just beginning to discover. In time, you could take me on and probably win. Does that make you feel any better?"

"A little." She swallowed. "How did it feel, to know what you were?"

He took his hand away from her face and withdrew the claw. His hand looked normal now, the nails well formed, neatly trimmed close to his fingertips, the hand clean and strong. No sign of scales. "Shapeshifters don't come into their abilities until they reach puberty." He flashed a sudden grin, transforming him from solemn regard to mischievous schoolboy. "My parents sent me to an ordinary school, at least one that was ordinary at the time, and to a tutor to give me special lessons."

"Reeling, writhing and arithmetic?" she said, quoting *Alice In Wonderland*.

"Something like that. Flying, controlling my shapes, and what happens every month. We're as subject to the moon's cycles as any woman. At the full moon, we are compelled to shift. We'd better be out of sight when that happens!"

"Do you have to stay that way for the whole time?"

"That way?" His smile was gently mocking. "Well that's how it's supposed to be, but you have to work at it, learn how to fight the compulsion. For the whole time, usually about three days, you're under the compulsion, but after the first shift, you can control it."

"All that and puberty too!"

He grinned. "Yeah, I was a bundle of hormones for a few years. Preparation doesn't really give you experience of the real thing."

She knew the heat in her body she felt meant something specific. She wanted him, badly. None of what he'd told her made her want him any less than she had the first night. His blatant nakedness made her want to touch. And this, at least, was right between them.

This time she reached out and touched his chest. He looked down, watched her

spread her fingers over him, caress the muscles surrounding his nipples, trace the shapes with her palm. "I think I can be brave for a little longer," she breathed. "Show me how a shapeshifter makes love."

He lifted his head and looked at her, softness and desire mixed in his eyes. When he reached for her she went to him, let him roll her under him and kiss her. "Are you sure? I saw you when I shifted. You were afraid and distressed." His hard shaft pressed against her belly.

She smiled up at him. "I was, but isn't that normal? You should have been disturbed if I hadn't shown that. I can accept you, Dev, all that you are, but you'll have to give me a little time to get used to it, perhaps help me to get used to it. It's the inner man, the inner person I'm coming to love, not the outward form."

He gazed down at her, saying nothing for a moment. He wouldn't pretend to misunderstand her, then. Understanding and sincerity filled his gaze and then he murmured the one word, "Yes," in acceptance and bent to kiss her.

"One more thing," he whispered, his lips a breath away from hers. "I'll use protection if you want, but you saw what happened when I shifted."

She understood immediately. "You healed."

"I healed. Injuries heal. Diseases and illnesses don't cross the barrier. And I can't give you children."

She cupped his cheek in her hand. "One day I might be sorry about that." Gently, she drew him back down but there was nothing gentle about his kiss. Immediately their mouths opened wide, ravaging as though this was the only important thing in the world, the only action that mattered for as long as they lived.

Whatever he was, for this moment Dev Wyvern was hers, and she was his.

His hand slid over her body from her waist to her breast, cupping it gently, seeking out the nipple and rubbing it with his thumb, coaxing it to a hard peak. His actions, so careful, were a complete contrast to the way he devoured her with his mouth, as though she was the epitome of his desires. As he was of hers.

His back felt strong and capable under her hands, no swelling, none of the damage Clay and his friends had inflicted on him apparent any more. She stroked him in long sweeps, her hands settling on his buttocks, smooth, curved muscle made for her touch.

When his mouth left hers, he kissed his way down to her breasts, taking each nipple in turn into the warm, wet haven to lick and kiss. His hands stroked and caressed, each touch pulling her senses on alert, higher until the slightest touch of his fingertip drove her wild with wanting. Everything centered on her groin, her body softening for him, although he hadn't touched her there-yet. When she sat up, dying to touch and kiss him he pushed her back. "Let me have this time. I want to know you inside and out." She lay back under the gentle pressure of his hands, prepared to endure.

He continued on his journey of exploration, pausing to caress and kiss, murmuring words she didn't catch, but felt, his breath hot against her skin. When he touched the inside of her thigh she immediately opened for him, and at once he kissed her, the most intimate kiss of all, as devouring and needy as the ones he'd lavished on her mouth.

He drove his tongue into her and she arched up to his mouth, seeking, aching for him. When he withdrew, she heard his words this time, because he spoke them louder. "You are perfect, Alix, perfect. Ready for some shapeshifter magic?"

"Yes, oh yes, anything!"

Alix wasn't quite ready for his tongue to spear into her body, hot and wet, and long.

Incredibly long. Much longer than a man's tongue could possibly be. "Oh God!"

He licked in deeply, tasted her deep, deep inside, caressed her and unerringly found the spots that drove her wild.

The tip of his tongue curled around her cervix. She could feel it, its delicate twin tips probing her, discovering the secrets even she didn't know about. Her first orgasm exploded through her body, and the second, close on the heels of the first, shattered her.

She didn't see the change, but when he came back up the bed, he looked normal. No long tongue curling out of his mouth to give him the air of a serpent, just Dev, green eyes glowing in the dim light of the curtained room.

Her mouth slightly open, still panting from what he had just done she watched his eyes change. Red flashes sparked, deep in the moss green, spreading until the whole of his iris was a deep, glowing red, the pupil wide and dark, wider than she'd seen in any human before.

It was still Dev, still the man she wanted. Without hesitation, Alix lifted her hand to curl around his neck and drag him down for her kiss. She tasted herself on his lips, forcing her realization that this man, this being, knew her more intimately than anyone else had ever known her. He positioned himself and entered her.

His kiss turned sweet, caressing, and he came inside her gently, softly pushing aside the folds of wet flesh, sliding deeply and gradually within, making her feel every inch of his hardness.

Then he held still, embedded to the hilt, and he grew. His cock lengthened and expanded. She wanted to see it, see how large he became, but she didn't want him to leave her body to show her. Ever. He could stay here until the end of time, as far as she was concerned.

He lifted his head, and stared at her. The red had receded, but not completely gone, flashes of deep ruby illuminating the soft green. She stared back, letting him see what he'd done to her. The stunned wonder she felt must reflect in her eyes. "You're amazing," he rumbled softly. "Most women would have run a mile by now."

"If you weren't Dev Wyvern, I might have." She shifted a little, loving his fullness inside her body. "I would have missed something wonderful."

He moved, and her body arched of its own accord, straining up to meet him. Her eyes closed in a reflex action and she forced them open again. She wanted to see him, watch him watching her, read him.

"I won't open my mind to you this time," he murmured. "Let's do this gradually, discover each other bit by bit."

She grinned. "My bit says hello to your bit." To emphasize which bits she meant, she pushed against him, lifting her breasts to press against his chest. "Oh that feels good! I never touched anyone who felt half so good before."

He growled a rumble of mock aggression and withdrew, before driving back in a movement that rocked her to the core. When he withdrew, she moaned, opening her eyes to watch him, show him what she felt.

It was almost too much. Lights sparkled in the depths of his eyes, reminding her who he was, what he was, but she loved it. What he was had already brought her more ecstasy than she could ever remember. Too right, she would have remembered this, if it had ever happened before.

He moved slowly, deeply, and her body responded, curling up to meet him, but it wasn't a lightning storm this time, more like a slow burn. She could think, respond, enjoy

every nuance.

Could she really be falling in love with him? The traumas of the past few days said not, but as she lay under Dev, feeling him pitch her to heights she wasn't aware existed before, she wasn't so sure. It felt right in his arms, as though she belonged there, as though he belonged in her arms, too. Another climax sparkled through her, and she cried out in joy.

Dev pushed his body up, drawing her with him, forcing them both to their knees. Before she could wonder at the strength that had lifted her not inconsequential weight, she felt something slide around her. Something warm, scaly, and dry. Glancing down, she whimpered.

Black coils embraced her from hips to breast, going around their joined bodies three times in all, the coils decreasing in diameter as they curled up their bodies. She turned her head to find Dev, now absolutely still, watching her, a guarded expression on his face.

"Wh-what?"

"My tail." His voice came out as a deep growl. "I need to do this *need* to. I can't explain it, Alix. Before, I was playing, trying to make it good for you, and show you what it means to make love with a shapeshifter, but I didn't plan this. I wanted to hold you close and tight, and this happened. It's never happened to me before. Perhaps it's part of bonding."

Her arms were free, lifted above the coils, so she tentatively touched the curve in the middle. It abraded her very slightly, the roughness a delicious contrast to the smooth skin and soft hair of Dev's body. When he moved, pressing gently into her, the coils rubbed against her. She moaned and closed her eyes. "I don't care. It feels good, Dev, almost too good."

Without any warning, he erupted into a firestorm of loving, driving deep, withdrawing only to slam into her again. He pushed her back down on the mattress, the coils of his tail around them, and lifted his hips within the loose circumference, slamming into her hard, driving her up into the world only they shared.

Alix lost control of her body, could only push back, lift her legs to curl around his buttocks, her heels pressing into the fleshiest part, urging him on, the sensation of his tail—*his tail!*—curling up around the sole of her foot only heightening her excitement. "Never, never stop!" she cried, forgetting everything except this incredible sensation, the maelstrom they inhabited. Another few thrusts and she was past words, only able to press her body close and closer, the combustible heat surrounding them, surging up inside her body.

He drove deep, deeper still, and she actually felt him come. His seed spurted, hard and hot, deep inside her, stimulating parts of her no one had ever touched before, making her contract in an orgasmic frenzy. His cry held no words, only a sense of wonder and fulfillment.

She had no way of telling how long it went on. It could have been ten seconds, ten minutes, or even ten hours. She didn't care. Time meant very little, only the immediate here-and-now sensation of a physical joining, a bonding that seemed both inevitable and miraculous.

His tail withdrew, curling around them like an electric flex going back into its compartment, leaving them free to separate, except that they didn't. Dev rolled to one side, taking her with him, still embedded deeply inside her. She curled in, loving the warmth, the companionship.

His low sound of satisfaction made her smile. She buried her head in the warmth of

his chest, unwilling to allow the moment to pass.

"That's how a shapeshifter makes love," he murmured against the cushion of her hair.

She sighed, her breath ruffling over his chest, making him close his eyes to savor the sheer pleasure of the small movement. "How can you want me? You're so beautiful."

"Hey, I thought that was my line?" He curled his hand around her neck, stroking it gently.

She laughed shortly. "Hardly. I'm no beauty, Dev. You don't have to pretend."

A guttural growl arose from his throat, and he firmed his grasp around her neck. He dragged her up to face him, letting his anger show in his eyes. This wasn't the first time she'd said something like that. How could she think she wasn't lovely? "Who told you that? Who told you you weren't beautiful?"

Her mouth dropped open a little, clearly stunned by his response. "Everyone. My parents and my brother told me, and I've been fighting my weight forever." She glanced down, avoiding meeting his eyes. "When I was little, we went to live in a community, one dedicated to the PHR. It wasn't violent then, at least I don't think it was."

She huffed and clenched her fists. He wanted to clench his too, to hit anyone who'd made her feel this way, but he stayed silent, let her talk. "I went to school there, had friends there, everything. The community broke up just before I was due to leave school, and my parents bought the farmhouse instead. They wanted to invite people there to form a new community, they formed a small unit, but then the werewolves or whatever they were attacked, and they died." She didn't stop, and her very restraint told Dev she was hiding what that event meant to her.

"Clay and I needed to earn our living, and the shop seemed a good way of doing it. I loved beautiful jewelry, and I learned a lot about it, it was something I could do without upsetting anyone. I used to create it, too. Clay went to business school while I worked in department stores and shops, earning our way, so we could keep our capital whole. He said he'd take care of us afterwards and he didn't let me down." She raised her gaze to his face, earnestly persuasive. "He didn't, Dev. Clay has always put me first, above everything else. As soon as he finished his degree, we started the shop, and with his business sense and my practical knowledge we did well." She met his solemn gaze. He ached for her pain, but saw her sincerity, knew Clay Lancaster had a redeeming feature he had to take into account. Already Dev had labeled the man as 'enemy,' someone to be fought and defeated, but Alix was forcing him to look at her brother in another light. He stroked her shoulder, knew he would have to re-think his attitude to Alix's brother, if only because she loved him.

"Clay used to tell me I was beautiful, but I'm his sister, and I could never take him seriously. Not after being told by everyone in the community that I was odd looking. I was too dark, they told me, and my eyes were funny. They are, you know." She smiled shyly, but he didn't respond, gave nothing away.

Behind his mental shield, Dev fought down his anger, waited for the fury to abate so he could give her the comfort and reassurance she deserved. He would use the anger later and he'd enjoy every minute of it. He just gazed at her, waiting for her to tell her story, his arms curled loosely around her. "I know I'm overweight, and I'm neither tall nor short. Just average. Even my boyfriends said they liked me because I was ordinary, they didn't have to worry that I'd be snatched away by someone else, and the one-night stand was

madness, but it was fun. He never rang me, although he said he would. And it's true. Nobody thinks I'm beautiful, Dev, so don't tell me I am."

He gazed at her, into her eyes, then lifted one hand and touched her lip, just at the corner. "If I think so, then I'll say it. So all through your childhood, people said you weren't lovely?" His initial fury was beginning to subside. He could trust himself to speak again.

"They said I was plain. Comments like, 'It's just as well you have some brains, because you won't get far on your looks.' "

That almost made him lose it again, but gazing at her sweetness, her absolutely delectable body and exquisite features, he could have wept. "I could tell you cliché after cliché, all about beauty being in the eye of the beholder, on the inside and all that. Instead, I'll tell you the truth. You *are* beautiful, Alix." She opened her mouth but he put his finger over her lips, silencing her. "My turn to speak. Yes you are. But you don't believe it, so you don't have enough confidence, and you don't dress well." He smiled wryly. "A man has to look *beyond* your clothes to see you. You wear things that conceal your figure. The first time I saw you, you wore a navy suit. Not your color, Alix. Not with your dark hair and eyes, your creamy skin."

"You're a fashion expert? I never considered my clothes very much. I choose my garments quickly, sometimes without going into the changing rooms. I don't like mirrors."

"I might not be a fashion expert, but I am an art expert. I have to know something about color, don't I? Sweetness, you need a whole new wardrobe, one to make the most of your glorious figure." She pulled back, but he wouldn't let her, drawing her closer. "Yes, it is, it is. Do you think I get so hard around you because I feel sorry for you?" He stroked her back, smoothed his hands down to her bottom, relishing the feel of her skin under his hands. "Woman, you turn me on more than anyone else I've ever met. You only hate the way you look because you have an exotic cast. Your eyes, your hair. You're a Hungarian. I should have known you were a Nadasdy because of those alone. I've met others in your family, and there's a remarkable similarity."

"You know them?"

His heart ached to see her eagerness. The PHR had kept her apart, away from everyone who might have helped her. "Some. You'll meet them before long."

"It's difficult to believe."

"Please try. Try for me, but above all, try for your lovely self."

Her smile eased his soul a little. "I will. I'm about to start something new, aren't I? I'll make it part of that, like making a New Year resolution. A new life."

He swept the covers back and picked her up as though she weighed nothing. Certainly, she was no strain to him. "Let's take that shower."

He hoped she didn't realize she might not see him again for a while after today. He would have to tell her, but that would come soon enough. She had to go, for her own good, but he'd miss her, God how he'd miss her!

Chapter Nine

From the outside, Alix would never have known this building was a center for beings she was only just beginning to believe in. It looked so ordinary. They'd been here, in this avenue in downtown Manhattan, for nearly thirty years. A faceless gray office building, rows of glass windows, most of which were treated to make them one way, just like many other buildings in the same neighborhood.

She'd imagined some kind of fortified underground bunker, secret handshakes and passwords, but it was nothing like that.

True, they'd arrived underground, but that was only because the car park was underground. Wearing the clothes delivered for her with their breakfast, simple black pants and a plain t-shirt with a wool jacket to keep out the chill, Alix didn't feel like herself, but a different person. The clothes had been a size smaller than the ones she usually bought, but they'd fitted. And usually she'd avoid pants cut quite this tightly, but Dev had growled and cupped her ass when he'd seen her in them. "I'll have to fight them off."

"Who?"

"All the men that'll flock to you once they see you like this."

She'd laughed, but deep inside, something began to thaw. The constant denigration by the community had had a purpose. It was meant to keep her down, keep her subservient. Knowing it and feeling it were separate things, and she'd known it for a while. But with Dev's obvious interest in her, she had begun to believe it, too.

She couldn't imagine her affair with Dev would go on much longer. He was British, had a life over there, and she had a life elsewhere. Or perhaps she didn't. Still, she was glad she told him how she felt. No more lies, not any more. Her stomach roiled with nerves as Dev showed a security man a plastic card in a wallet, and the man stared at him for a moment, then nodded.

"Don't I have to sign in or something?"

Dev smiled at her. "No, you're expected."

"What was that card?"

Dev called the elevator, and when the doors opened, ushered her inside, a hand on the small of her back. He reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out the wallet again. Wordlessly he gave it to her.

She gasped. "You're CIA! How is that possible?"

He gave a short laugh. "I'm also MI6, Interpol and one or two others. Sometimes under a different name." He hooked his hand around her elbow and drew her closer when she tried to pull away. "No, I'm not some kind of super spy or anything like that. I'm a consultant. My security clearance isn't particularly high, although Cristos can arrange something for a specific job if I need it. Mostly, I act as advisor."

He hit the stop button and the elevator ground to a halt. Now Alix was really nervous. He turned to face her and although she wanted to take a step back, there was nowhere to go. It was a small elevator. "All of us, shapeshifter, whatever, know we have to work with the authorities to a certain extent. In return, we get the papers and identities we need, and we get covert support. That's why very few of us will sign on as agents. We can't offer our ultimate loyalty to a country, when we are members of communities which need it first. Do you see?"

She nodded. "I think so. But you wouldn't do anything to harm my country, would

you?"

"Tricky question, Alix. Not if they did nothing to harm my community. If at any time the government here decided to go with the PHR and wipe out my people, I'd have to. But there's no sign of that. There are some governments hostile to us, sadly, but not this one. Very few know about us precisely, but we do offer help, if we can. But you have to understand. There are many Talents here, upstairs. Not all appreciate questions, so I'm asking you to let me take the lead this once. I'm asking you here because I don't want you to think I don't appreciate you, or want you to blossom, but it can get fraught sometimes if people ask the wrong questions."

"You're making me worse. I'm already nervous."

He bent and kissed her softly on the lips. "Don't be. In a little while you'll be as blasé about it as the rest of us."

She gave a shaky laugh. "Let's get it over with, shall we?"

"Sure." He pressed the button and they continued their ascent.

She expected to get out on the thirteenth floor. It seemed to fit, really, but disappointingly, they stopped at the tenth. With a glance to her, Dev allowed her to step out first, but followed her immediately, moving up to take her elbow to guide her.

The lobby led to a large, open plan office. Cubicles containing a desk, a chair and a computer adorned the ones she passed. Some were tidy, some held pinup pictures, a scattering of paper, and handle-less mugs full of pencils. Phones rang; low chatter prevailed around the photocopying machine at the side of the office. Everyone looked—well, normal. Women in suits, men in shirt and pants, ties knotted firmly under their collars. Some glanced at Alix then looked away; others fixed her with curious stares. Remembering Dev's advice, Alix didn't try to stare them out, though she was tempted. It had been a quiet rebellion, the way she had retained her singularity, proved to herself that she mattered after all. This time, remembering Dev's warning, she refrained.

Dev nodded to one or two people, but he didn't stop. Their progress was steady, but unhurried, towards an unobtrusive door at the opposite end of the long room. She didn't need the small aluminum label beside the door to tell her this was Cristos's office.

After holding the door open for her, Dev followed her through. Inside a woman sat at an ordinary looking office desk, adorned with the usual items; computer keyboard and monitor, desk diary, open to show a heavily filled in schedule, pens, notebook and stationery. Behind it, however, sat a most unusual person. A woman with blue and red striped hair. It was straight, worn in a neat pageboy cut off at her chin, but blue and red striped. One eye was made up with blue eye shadow, the other with scarlet. She smiled. "He's waiting for you."

Dev's chuckle made her blink. She must have been staring. "This is Diane, Cristos's assistant. One of the few mortals to work here, so she feels she has to stand out."

"At least you've never called me a mere mortal." Diane seemed to take the introduction in good part. "I'm going dark green next week. I think, but I rather like the stripes. What do you think to green and white stripes?"

"I think your hair will fall out if you carry on like this."

Behind Dev's back, Alix exchanged a 'Men!' look with Diane and her tension eased. It was so ordinary, something women did everywhere. "I like it," she ventured, before following Dev into what she had mentally labeled the lion's den.

The lion was shorter than Dev, but since Dev was around six feet three, that wasn't

saying much. Older, too, by the look of him, but Alix knew looks could be deceptive, especially in this place. He looked like a fit man in his mid fifties. His appearance was immaculate. A dark blue suit, contrasting pleasantly with Dev's charcoal gray, a matching tie, white shirt, gold cufflinks gleaming at his wrists. Nothing obtrusive, but everything screamed quality, especially to someone like Alix, used to discerning quality from good, and good from poor, in her jewelry business. Which after today, might be no more, she reminded herself. She had no idea what Department Fifty-Seven had in store for her, but she'd bet her last dollar they wouldn't let her go back to the shop for a while. Her customers would call in vain.

Cristos offered her his hand and she shook it, feeling a brief but firm warmth before he greeted Dev. Two comfortable leather upholstered chairs were set before the large desk in front of the window and at his bidding, they sat. Cristos served them coffee himself, from a coffee maker set on a small side table by the window. She liked that about him, that Diane wasn't expected to make it part of her duties.

Dev reached out and took her hand, twining his fingers between hers. Inappropriate, maybe, but very welcome. Cristos noticed, he could hardly have missed it, but made no comment. "She's a Sorcerer, Cristos."

"I can see that."

So what Dev had said about her looks was true.

"Ms. Lancaster. Welcome to Department Fifty-Seven. You should have come here years ago." Cristos stirred his coffee, every movement elegant. "I'm sorry you didn't. However, now you're here, I want to put you in touch with others of your kind. They will teach you how to use your Talents. You are undoubtedly Talented, though we don't know how much, so you will have to be taught how to block. You have to have a strong mental barrier, once you develop your Talents, or you'll go mad."

"I can already do that."

"Really?"

A fine pain seared through her head, like a hot needle through her flesh and she cried out, clapped her hands over her ears as though that would help. It was gone as soon as it appeared, but not Dev's infuriated, "Why did you do that? Dear God, Cristos, I brought her here for help, to be protected, not to come under more attack!"

Cristos held up one hand in a gesture of peace. "It was momentary and it hasn't harmed her. If she goes out into the world unprotected, far worse things could happen to her." He smiled, a brief quirk of his lips, and turned his attention to Alix. "I'm sorry, Ms. Lancaster, but it's imperative you understand the powers of some of the beings who might want to harm you."

"Why would they want to harm me?"

"Not all Talents are right thinking, any more than all humans are. Some don't know what they're doing, those, like you, who have been deliberately kept separate. But eventually, someone would have caught up with you, Talent or not. As well as the PHR, who you have reason to know well, there are other people, people who don't want to destroy Talents but exploit them. You need to be protected against them, and the best form of protection is to learn how to take care of yourself. I feel sure you'll agree."

She did, fervently. "I've had enough of being looked after and cared for. You're right. I want to take care of myself."

His smile broadened a little. Just as he lifted his cup to his lips, a knock came on the door. He didn't get to his feet, but called out "Come in!"

The door opened, and all Alix's senses went on alert, as though static electricity prickled through her whole body. A dark voice spoke. "You asked to see me?"

Slowly, Alix turned her head, to see someone who might be her brother. She recognized the uptilted eyes and sharp cheekbones, since she saw them every morning in her mirror. The dark hair was similar too, but straighter than hers and drawn back tightly.

But where she had curves, he had solid muscle. He regarded her as she was studying him, frankly, without subterfuge. This, she presumed, was a Nadasdy.

"You're quite right, I am kin to you." His accent was pronounced, his voice deep. "The family characteristics are unmistakable."

He strode forward, and grasped her hand, before nodding to Dev. "Wyvern."

"Vencel Takàsc." It sounded to Alix like "Toecatch," but she wondered, if Cristos called him a "Nadasdy," why that wasn't his name.

Cristos's voice broke into the family reunion. "Takàsc is in town for a few days."

"Two, to be exact. My sister Ilona needed to do some shopping, but we planned to go back to Montana on Wednesday. She needs some peace."

"How is she?"

Takàsc lifted his head to look at Cristos, and his smile was warmer when he said her name. "Ilona's extremely well. Seven months along and blooming. But I don't think we'll be traveling again until the baby comes. It is too hard on my nerves."

Why wasn't her husband looking after her? Alix wondered if she wanted to know, but Takàsc turned to her with a smile. "You will have to keep your thoughts more secret around a Sorcerer. To answer your question, my sister's husband died. And when I find the people who killed him, I will kill them." His expression turned suddenly fierce, and Alex knew the promise was no idle threat.

Cristos studied the two faces, male and female before a smile flickered over his fine-cut lips. "Amazing. I need hardly tell you, Alix, that Vencel is a Nadasdy. Vencel, this is Alix Lancaster."

Takàsc frowned a little. "How is it I've never come across you before?"

Nothing like asking directly. "Until ten years ago I was a member of the PHR, in a community closed off from everywhere else. Then I moved to a farmhouse, and we weren't encouraged to communicate with anyone outside. It was only five years ago I came to New York with my brother. My grandmother was Hungarian, but my parents never spoke of her, only my brother. She came out of Hungary after the '56 uprising."

"As did my mother." Takàsc didn't bother to pull up a chair; he sat on a corner of Cristos's desk. It seemed too informal for this beautifully appointed place, with these men in tailored suits. But Takàsc wore dark trousers and a polo shirt in a pale shade of lavender. On him, the color looked good, the pale shade an interesting contrast to his dark coloring. She ventured a smile. He smiled back. "I will tell you everything you need to know, introduce you to other members of our family. We are known as Sorcerers, for want of a better name." Only the quiet clink of china as Cristos poured Takàsc a coffee and replenished theirs disturbed the peace of the office. "Human beings, which we undoubtedly are, are born with all their psychic senses open. Most evolve a strong barrier in their first week of life; they cannot breach that barrier, or need help if they wish to do so. Most people do not realize what they are capable of. We Nadasdys, we do not develop a barrier, it is a genetic quirk. We have to build one for ourselves, but because we have spent years open, our senses are developed, and strong."

That made sense. "My childhood was no fun. I could hear everyone around me in

my head. I had to fight it, all the way, and I think I locked some of it out."

Takàsc nodded. "I had teachers. I cannot imagine what it would have been like to face that on my own." He glanced around, and met Cristos's cool, gray eyes. "This woman is remarkable."

"I know it. I'm glad we found her in time."

"In time?" What now?

Takàsc's attention immediately returned to her, and only her, his gaze so intent she almost felt his concentration, "He means that your powers would have regained a hold over you if you had continued to ignore them. Either you control them, or they control you. May I read you?"

"I'm sorry?" The phrase confused her.

"May I look inside you, see what is there? If I know, I may be able to help you better. But I need your permission. To do it without is the act of a barbarian." This time he glanced at Dev, as though Dev had said something. He hadn't.

"You're very perceptive," Dev said quietly.

"It is my gift, shapeshifter," Takàsc agreed. "Sometimes a curse. Do you have any objection?"

"None at all. Please, if Alix wishes it, go ahead." Alix heard the tightness in his voice. He minded all right, but he knew as well as she did that she needed someone to help her.

Takàsc nodded and smiled at Alix. What else could she do but say, "Yes, please go ahead?"

He touched her forehead with the very tips of the first two fingers of his left hand. That was all, but his touch pierced through to her very soul. Accurate, seeking, his mind followed. She relaxed, hearing his voice in her head, soothing her. It felt extremely strange, but she recognized him. Patterns in his head, the way he thought, all were oddly familiar to her. She knew he wasn't showing her all, that holding what he wished to hold back was as precise as his touch, but the knowledge she would be able to do that in time, relieved her mind, did its own work to ease her tension. The tension she'd felt for most of her life, holding back, hiding, pretending she was normal, whatever that meant. Under Vencel Takàsc's gentle touch, she relaxed completely for the first time she could remember. Ever.

When he exited, she felt almost bereft. She opened her eyes. When had she closed them? Takàsc smiled at her, and instinctively she looked for Dev. He was waiting to link his hand with hers once more. She felt he needed it even more than she did.

"You have done very well," Vencel said. "Your barrier is strong and well made. It will hold against most probes. You have Talents you need some help to bring to light. You know you have telepathy, but you need to channel it better. You also have a strong telekinetic Talent. More may be there, but work on these two first and leave the rest for another time. There is no hurry. Is there?" He turned his head to question Cristos.

Cristos shook his head. "We'll find a safe house for her."

"She may come back with me, if she wishes. To Montana." Clutching Dev's hand, Alix listened to Vencel. "My sister and I would be honored to have you as our guest. I can ask other members of my family to visit, to help teach you. They will be delighted. They have gathered for the birth, although it is months away as yet." His smile widened and warmth crept into his eyes when he mentioned his family and his sister. "We have her husband's family too, who happen to drop in rather frequently. Ilona needs peace and tranquility, not the combined members of two families fussing over her. If we have a guest,

that might help us to keep them at a reasonable distance. They can fuss over you instead."

Alix couldn't imagine what it would be like, to be pregnant and lose her husband. At the thought, she gripped Dev's hand tighter. "I'll be a danger to you." That was the first excuse she could think of, but it was swept aside immediately.

"No, you will not. We can look after our own. Our enemies will not trace you there. The ranch is in a particularly propitious place, at the crossing of two powerful ley lines." At Alix's questioning glance, he explained. "Lines of power. They cross the earth invisibly and the places they meet are either very good, or very bad."

"It's very kind of you, but I don't want to go. I want to see this through. You say I'm strong enough. Then let me stay." She turned to Cristos, unashamedly pleading. "You can't send me away now!"

"I have to." Cristos was thin lipped, stern. "You know why."

"No, I don't."

The room was as silent as the grave before Cristos said, "They killed a dragon and his mate. The cell is to be taken out."

Chapter Ten

"No!" Springing to her feet, Alix headed for the door. But she had nowhere to go.

Spinning around, her back to the door, she watched the three men, her eyes wide and wary. She looked like a deer cornered by dogs.

Dev sprang to his feet and went to her, his face full of concern. "You know what happened, don't you?" She shook her head. He frowned in anger. "Don't you?"

It was the first time he'd ever raised his voice around her. Shaken, distressed, she met his eyes. He let her see his anguish, feel it. "They were my relatives, Alix. Kin. Not close, but when a shifter dies all his kin feels it as their own. That's why I came here, to avenge my kin. Falling in love with you wasn't something I bargained for." In front of everyone, he'd said it. "I thought you were part of it all. The relief when I searched you and found none of his blood on you! You know how they died, and why, don't you?"

"Yes." Tears stood in her eyes, but they didn't fall.

"Then tell us." Cristos sounded just as serene, but Dev heard the tremor in his voice, quelled as soon as he'd detected it. "Were you there, did you see it?"

She shook her head. "Clay showed me some pictures, said it was proof shapeshifters existed. I didn't want to believe. I'd never really believed in his wilder stories, and while I believed there were no such things as dragons and the other creatures, I could be with him. The pictures could have been faked. A dragon in death, if you believed. If you didn't, it could have been a mocked up fake. I wasn't even sure they'd killed anyone at all. The PHR had been good to me, brought me up, looked after me and Clay."

"They wanted the pendant. That's why they killed the dragons."

"Yes." She met his eyes. He'd known it. If she'd been implicated in the death, he would have known. "We used it to draw you in. They wanted a live one to experiment on. To use that drug on to see if it worked."

"I let them take me. It was obvious that the pendant would lead us to the murderers."

Cristos flicked a switch on the intercom on his desk. "Diane, are the others ready?"

"Conference room eleven, Cristos."

Dev looked up. "Let her in on the briefing. Give her that much trust."

Cristos glanced at Takàsc, who nodded. "She has no loyalty to murderers. I will vouch for her, if you need me to."

Well that was one way of putting it, not quite what she had in mind. She'd rather Dev vouched for her, but it was this relative stranger who offered to stand at her back. In that brief examination Vencel Takàsc had seen everything about her, everything he wanted to see. It was terrifying. Could she have power like that, one day? Would she want it?

"Very well. Do you want to attend, Takàsc, for information? If Alix accepts your offer of sanctuary, it's as well to know what you're up against."

He shrugged. "Let me call Ilona first to tell her I'll be delayed. I'll catch up with you." He pulled a cell phone from a small holder at his waist.

As they went out of the room, they heard Takàsc speaking in a voice heavy with velvet, much softer than before, "Hello, *földanya*. Can you spare me for another hour?"

His laughter at whatever his sister said was pure seduction to Alix. Vencel Takàsc was gorgeous, but not for her, not now.

Conference room eleven was an ordinary looking room, furnished with a long table

surrounded by chairs. The walls were a soft maroon. She'd seen rooms like it before in hotels and offices, but not so the people who waited there, seated around the large, oval conference table.

None of them was on edge, none as apprehensive as she felt. She walked in holding her head high, determined not to show her nervousness in front of strangers. Dev was by her side, but he didn't touch her, or try to communicate with her.

Clay had killed someone. Someone like Dev. The words echoed in her head, but she had to force herself to concentrate now, to listen to what they could tell her. For all his sins, she loved her brother, couldn't help but hope he hadn't done the murders himself, that she could, somehow, save him.

She listened carefully to the introductions. "We should make it clear who we are and what we can do," Cristos said to her. "There is an element of danger in this assignment, and you have to be able to trust each other." One or two people shrugged, one leaned back, a frown between his brows but he said nothing. Dev held a chair for Alix, before he sat next to her. Cristos took a seat at the head of the table.

At Cristos's nod, they went around the table, introducing themselves. A strong man with golden hair and deep brown eyes began. "I'm Laurie Friedland, a shapeshifter griffin. I'm a football-sorry, soccer player, supposed to be recovering from injury." His accent was distinctly English.

"Does your injury concern you?" Cristos asked sharply.

Friedland grinned. "Not any more. But I twisted my hamstring in front of thirty thousand spectators so I can hardly make a miraculous recovery. I'm here on a goodwill tour, while my knee supposedly recovers. I'm glad to be able to offer you some help."

Dev and Laurie exchanged smiling nods. They knew each other. Not surprising, since they were compatriots and shapeshifters.

Another blond god spoke, leaner than Laurie Friedland, a narrower face with amazing blue eyes. "Fabrice Germain, French Sorcerer. I'm an advertising executive, but I tend to work my own hours. Glad to help." His accent was tinged with French, but only slightly.

The dark shadow sitting furthest away from the window was next. "Andreas Constant. Vampire."

Alix gasped, and he gazed at her, his dark eyes alight with unholy amusement. "Am I your first vampire?"

Cristos spoke quietly but with authority. "This is Ms Lancaster's first visit to Department Fifty-Seven. Let's show her some respect."

The vampire inclined his head slightly. Although his clothing was dark, his face lean and ascetic, Alix could have walked past him in the street and never noticed anything different about him. He had the air of a professor or a scholar, not a vampire. She'd always labeled them creatures of nightmare, but this man looked just like a man.

The door opened and Vencel Takàsc entered the room. While they glanced at him, they didn't show any overt curiosity. Alix guessed it seemed to be the custom here for people to introduce themselves, if they wanted to. "Vencel Takàsc, Sorcerer," he said, and took a seat. "I'm not joining you, but I have offered Ms. Lancaster sanctuary, if she wishes to accept it, so I need to be brought up to speed." Nobody objected.

There was one person left, a woman. Her hair was scarlet, blazing in the late afternoon sun, her eyes, gleaming amber. She had a pointed chin, high cheekbones and was as slim as Alix dreamed of being, so her surprise was relatively mild when she

introduced herself. "Svetlana Yevchenko. Firebird shapeshifter. I work as a catwalk model."

Alix swallowed. This was the kind of woman Dev preferred. And he was going to work in a team including this beauty. She didn't stand a chance.

"Deverell Wyvern, shapeshifter." Alix worked very hard at not looking at Dev, to see how he would like working with a model, a beautiful woman and a shapeshifter. Only five minutes ago, he'd said he loved her, but probably not for much longer. She still couldn't believe he'd said it, and she wasn't entirely sure she believed him. They hadn't known each other long enough. Perhaps he did love her, now, but how long would it last?

Cristos glanced around and got to his feet. "You know the basics, I take it? We have a PHR cell we need to take out. They killed a dragon and his mate."

"Who?" Friedland was the first to ask, but the others sat up a little straighter.

"His name was Thomas Murdoch and the mate was his wife Maria. He worked as farmer in Iowa. Did you know him?" Everyone shook their heads, but the grim lines remained on their faces.

"We have the go ahead from the relevant authorities. We are to take out the cell, discover what it knew, any links to others and use any means necessary to discover the facts. I have to warn you that you are requested to use the minimum necessary force, but you may kill if you have to. You know the drill." It seemed they did, for they all nodded or grunted acquiescence. "If we capture any alive, and let's try for all of them, we may bring them back here to be questioned."

Takàsc grunted. "If you need another Sorcerer to help, call me."

Cristos nodded. "Thank you Vencel. We have a team standing by, but I appreciate your offer of help. I won't call on you unless I need to." Because his sister was pregnant, Alix guessed, and relied on Vencel in the absence of her husband. A good boss always considered his employees' circumstances. Not that these people could be called employees. From what Dev had told her, they would all be "consultants," not regular agents. She'd heard of covert operations called "black ops." What was blacker than black?

"Ms. Lancaster here was reared by the PHR, in one of their communities. She knew nothing of the cells and the violence until recently, believed they were taking the legal, political route." They still were, although they hadn't managed to get any members into Congress yet. They had just added illegal and violent methods to their repertoire. "She is of Sorcerer stock, and she needs our help. Her brother is a member of the cell we need to take out." A murmur of sympathy from Ms. Yevchenko. Although she wanted to dislike her, Alix found the model's soft glance soothing, and tried to remind herself that Dev was not her property and would make up his own mind. She could not let her petty jealousy get in the way. Her chronic insecurity wasn't his problem.

"She will not be an active part of this operation, but she has come over to us, and she needs training. After this is over, we'll bring her back in for instruction." Alix wasn't sure she liked the sound of that. Going back to school!

Takàsc rumbled dissent. "Her family will take care of that. We will keep you informed"

Cristos nodded, and then got down to detail, dimming the lights and showing an overhead slide of the layout of the farmhouse. They got to work.

With Alix's help, they firmed up the floor plan, and discussed the roles they were to take. Cristos let the team decide how they would work, a wise decision since he wasn't going into the field. They would communicate with telepathy, and use telekinesis to open

the locks in their way.

"The cell got hold of cephalox on the black market," Cristos said grimly. "So they might be armed with syringes of the stuff."

Svetlana gave a disbelieving laugh. "So you pack the team with shapeshifters? What are you thinking?"

Cristos turned a cold-as-a-fish look on to her. "That you would prefer to see the cell taken out yourselves, since it is your kind who have been harmed. I asked the Sorcerer and vampire to join to protect the Department and yourselves."

"It's true," Laurie Friedland said. "The community is up in arms about this. We'll just have to take the potential danger of the cephalox into consideration. Not give them a chance to use it."

Svetlana shrugged. Even that looked elegant, on her.

Cristos continued. "Dev captured a hard drive from the computer at the farmhouse, but it had little to tell us. The addresses of the members, encoded, and a few plans for future raids. We have the addresses covered, but no one has shown up. We didn't expect them to." Cristos's mouth firmed into a thin line. "They were planning to raid the houses of ordinary citizens, none of them Talents, as far as we know. Either they had false information or made stupid assumptions, probably the latter. We've had the planned victims of the raids moved for the time being, for their own safety. They believe it's an FBI operation."

It was horrible to think of unsuspecting people dragged in to this nightmare. A cold fear clutched Alix's heart. She wanted Clay out of it all, with her, not a member of the terror the PHR was fast turning into.

The plans sounded straightforward until they came to the details. "I'm taking the auction at Triscombe's tomorrow," Dev said. "They'll know where to find me, so it seems like the obvious place to start."

"They won't pass up an easy target like that," said Andreas, grinning almost wolfishly, although he'd introduced himself as a vampire. "Do we let them take you?"

Dev nodded. "Someone has to invite you in."

It took a moment for Alix to understand the real import of what he was saying. When she did, she turned slowly in her seat to face him, uncaring of anything else. "You're going to let them capture you?"

Dev met her stare. "I'm the obvious candidate. I'm going to draw them in and weaken them. They may have more than one hideaway, and we need to know as much as we can about them before we close down the cell."

"This is madness! Dev, you can't!" With or without her, she wanted him alive. "They'll kill you on sight!"

"No they won't." Dev took her hand in his, stroking it gently. To her dismay, she realized she was trembling, though more in anger than fear. She had to admit, at least to herself, that fear played a small part. "I need the pendant back, Alix, or I need to know it's been completely destroyed. I'm not sure exactly what it is, but it's a jewel of power, and it has my family crest on it. I can't leave it in their hands. And the rest of the team, especially Andreas here, need to be invited in. You know you have to invite a vampire in to your house, don't you?"

She shook her head, unable to take it all in. "But if he's a vampire, won't he be crippled in the daylight?"

Andreas crowed with laughter. Alix couldn't understand his odd reaction, and

turned to glare indignantly at him but he explained, once he had his breath back. "We have been spreading rumors about our kind for centuries. I'm glad some of them have taken so well. It helps us hide in plain sight. While I only have my powers after sundown, I am quite capable of going about in daytime. I'm sensitive to sunlight, it's true but I can bear it. We can't shift into bats; neither do we go around with fangs overhanging our mouths. We can see our reflections, and we can eat and drink, if we wish. The government calls that kind of thing disinformation, but we have been practicing it for centuries."

That made a lot of sense, but it also left Alix completely confused. "All the legends are false?"

"Not all of them." Andreas leaned back in his chair.

"There are no werewolves, werepanthers or even wererabbits, either," Dev said quietly. "Another urban legend. We are all creatures of myth. Dragons, griffins, rocs, unicorns and so on."

"You mean there *are* unicorns?" Alix's heart filled with unexpected delight. Unicorns had been a secret love of Alix's. The community had banned fairy stories, and stories about mythical beasts, but she'd seen a picture once and the memory of the snow white creature with the single, lethal horn had remained in her dreams ever since.

"Yes, there are unicorns. What most people think of as werewolves are in fact barghests, those great dogs that are supposed to be portents of death."

"If they're in a bad mood, they're more than portents," Laurie said dryly, and a ripple of laughter spread through the room.

The easing of tension could almost be touched. The people-beings-creatures-in the room visibly relaxed, stretching arms and legs, leaning back in their seats. Something had happened, something Alix wasn't party to.

They have accepted you.

His voice in her mind, after such a long absence, was a surprise. When she began to turn her head, he stopped her with a sharp command.

Do not! Unless you wish to advertise what we are to each other. Only lovers can converse at this deeper level.

She turned her head. She didn't care who knew. Alix received a smile of such dazzling sweetness it took her breath away. He took her hand and in front of everyone, kissed it before lowering them, still linked to the table. *Thank you.*

"Can you do this impartially?" The question came from Andreas.

It was a reasonable question. With his emotions engaged Dev could compromise the group by acting too precipitately, too violently. "Even more so. If this cell is not neutralized Alix is in danger. With it eliminated, she will be safer." This was why Dev wanted to take care of it personally. And why she did not want him to.

What a time to discover her feelings for him were so dangerously deep!

Dev took both her hands in his, staring deep into her eyes. "You must go with Takàsc, Alix. You are a prime target and I won't be able to concentrate unless I know you're safe. Will you go?"

"When?"

Takàsc's easy voice came from her other side. "We had planned for tomorrow, but we can leave earlier if you wish."

"No," she said, all her attention still on Dev. "Tomorrow." She didn't have to tell him why, but she wanted, with all her heart, to have at least one more night with him before they had to part. And she was not yet convinced of that, but this wasn't the place to argue about staying with him.

They didn't go back to the Timothy, but to another hotel. They traveled in a car with darkened windows. Alix sat numbly staring out the window at the shoppers and tourists thronging the streets, clutching Dev's hand, wondering if she would ever be out there again, instead of in here, carefully protected and guarded. Alix came to full comprehension that the threat on her life was all too real. Everything had changed, probably for good. Her heart ached for the apartment she shared with Clay, surrounded by reminders of her parents, their furniture, the things she'd grown up with. She might never see them again.

And Dev. More than anything else, she wanted to continue with him, but there were so many reasons why they couldn't. The hotel was four star, with the brightly lit, cream foyer, the comfortable, anonymous lounge and grand rooms she remembered from the Timothy, albeit this was another hotel. Two burly men dressed as bellhops, but to Alix's newly aware eyes so much more than that, escorted them upstairs to their room. At least they were to share a room, and not ensconced in solitary splendor to ponder and fret about what was to come.

Standing in the sterile white bathroom, Alix closed the bathroom cabinet and opened the wrapper on a clean toothbrush. She peered in the mirror. At least what she saw there was the same. She opened a new tube of toothpaste and tore off the seal, squeezing a little on to the brush. The fresh scent of peppermint assailed her nostrils. She'd always enjoyed the scent of mint. Now it only reminded her of the way her brother enjoyed a sprig of mint with his potatoes. Would she ever be free? Did she ever want to be? Were memories all she would have left of her brother, the man who had played with her, been patient with her, grieved with her when their parents had been taken from them?

Feeling tears prick her eyes, Alix turned her thoughts away from her brother. Something good had come of the day. There could be no doubt that she and Vencel Takàsc were related. She'd met Ilona Takàsc when she came into the department at the end of the day. Rounded with pregnancy Ilona Takàsc still possessed a quiet elegance Alix could never aspire to. But Ilona had been understanding and kind, and Alix knew she would value friendship with her.

Alix scrubbed at her teeth with more than her usual vigor. Perhaps she could scrub away the memories, just for one night, for one more night. Before Dev left her. He would not come back, whatever he said. Their lives were separate; they came from different parts of the world, different experiences. Hell, they were different species.

Arms wrapped around her from behind just as she'd finished rinsing her mouth and she straightened up and leaned back, into his warm body. They had here and now. That was what she must concentrate on. "They've delivered some things for you," he murmured, his breath warming her ear. "Come and see if you like them."

She walked into the bedroom and saw a rack of clothes and several boxes.

Bewildered by the number of items, Alix wandered across to the rack.

"They're all yours if you want them."

She couldn't possibly take all these. There were more clothes here than she'd ever owned in her life. Dev chuckled. "Cristos had them delivered from a few places, and I indulged myself a little and told him what I'd like to see you wearing."

She riffled through the racks. All the clothes were expensive, most with labels from up market department stores and boutiques, some designer. None were the unobtrusive, baggy clothes she ordinarily chose, and they all seemed to be at least a size smaller than usual. She passed on to the boxes, lifted the lid of the first one and gasped.

Lingerie, exquisitely lacy silk slips, even garter belts. "Th—they're not my style."

"Oh, darling, they are." Dev's voice seemed to have lowered an octave. Certainly, it was huskier than she was used to hearing. "I would pay good money to see you in any of these. I was going to suggest you just accept the lot and decide later what you want to keep, but—oh, I would really, *really* love to see you in this." He lifted a bra and matching panties in dark red lace. Very brief, quite thrilling underwear. But not for her. Not with her rounded body.

Alix cleared her throat. "They can't be my size. I'm-big."

"Bountiful." Gently, he pushed out one of the cups of the bra. "This will fit. Will you try it on, for me?"

That was the only thing he could have said that would have made her agree to wear them. For him. This was their last night before she left with Takàsc. Heaven knew when they would meet again, or even if.

She took the set and selected a couple of other things, but refused to show them to him, balling the garter belt tightly in her hand so he wouldn't be able to identify it. She returned to the bathroom and changed, careful to avoid looking in the mirror, feeling foolish, a sheep in wolf's clothing.

She had to admit the underwear felt good and it seemed Dev had a good eye for size. The underwired bra cups supported her breasts firmly, the three-quarter sized cups leaving a generous proportion of flesh spilling over the top, but he was right, it did fit her well. The panties where, she realized when she spread them out, actually a thong. She felt like an elephant but grimly she continued with her task, clipping the garter belt around her waist, slipping the straps under the panties and attaching the black silk stockings she'd brought in with her. She might as well try the whole thing, and with any luck, the belt and stockings would help to slim her down a little.

Still careful not to catch sight of herself in the mirror in case she took fright, she took the bathrobe from the back of the door and slipped her arms into the sleeves. Only when covered did she glance into the mirror so she could brush her hair to a shining sheet of dark silk. Her hair was her one pride, one she'd been careful not to share with anyone else, because she knew they would have cut her hair, or denigrated it so she was no longer proud of it if they'd found out. She knew these things, how they had constantly criticized her, everyone except Clay, who had staunchly defended her as his 'pretty sister.' Alix had been grateful for his support, but the criticism from everyone else, including her parents, had been so steady and constant it had worn her down. So now, although she knew she couldn't be as plain ugly as she'd been told, she still felt it, deep inside.

There was no miracle cure for years of conditioning, but Dev had given her hope. When he said she was lovely, that was only one voice against all the others battenning on her senses but he showed her, too. He touched her as though he couldn't help himself, and he hardened, wanting her body. His body responded to hers, bypassing brain activity. Thinking of the way his body reacted to hers made a little moisture seep between her legs. Alix wrenched her thoughts away from her fevered imagination and, taking a deep breath for courage, went through to the bedroom.

He was sitting on the bed but he stood when she entered and came across the room to her. He'd removed his jacket and tie, undone the first couple of buttons on his shirt and rolled up the sleeves but was otherwise as she had left him. "What's this?" He plucked at the robe, leaned down to murmur in her ear. "Off with it!"

He loosened the tie and slid the robe off her shoulders, before she could think or

protest. The robe fell to the ground and he put his hands on her shoulders, holding her a little away from him. His low growl left her in no doubt of his reaction, and if she had thought he was faking, the bulge at his groin could only confirm his sincerity. He lifted her chin with one crooked finger and made her meet his eyes. "Will you let me read you?"

Takàsc had read her, Cristos had read her. How could she deny her lover? Alix swallowed, and nodded. She lifted the barrier that kept everyone out of her mind.

He was there, she felt him gently slip in, an alien presence in her head. "I want you to read me, too. Will you, Alix?"

Another nod. It felt as though he'd taken her hand and led her inside. Warm, encouraging, reassuring thoughts bathed her and supported her. "Dev?"

He nodded, smiling. "Now look. See what I see." His hands on her shoulders, he turned her around.

She hadn't noticed there was a full length mirror on the inside of the door to the corridor. Facing her she saw a woman—herself—dressed as she'd never seen herself before. Surrounding her, arms loosely around her waist, a man. Tall, fully dressed, one heavy, dark lock of hair falling across his forehead gleaming in the overhead light, eyes dark with desire, eyeglasses glinting in the light. So sexy.

Thank you. His voice, softly intimate, whispered in her head. *But we're concentrating on you. At least, I am.*

She turned her head but received a sharp reprimand. *Keep looking in the mirror. See what I see.*

He moved his hands to the curve of her waist, and then up to cup her breasts, cradled in the sinfully lacy bra. "These are unbelievable." His voice was a shock after the intimacy of him in her mind. "I want you to hear this, love, take it in with all your senses. Listen to me. See yourself as I see you." His fingers found her nipples and pinched them gently through the bra. "Gorgeous, responsive, a handful and then some." He slid his hands away, down to her waist, sending a chill right through her. "There are few parts of a woman's body more sexy than this curve." He slid his hands over the skin, drawing them back to the dip above her buttocks. "Except this part. Lying on your front, waiting to accept my body in yours, bottom raised a little on a pillow. Can you see it?"

The picture he gave her was explicit and detailed. It was her, but she lay on a bed, bottom up, legs open, the pink inner lips of her labia clearly visible. His cock twitched against her, and he groaned. "Oh, no, not yet. You're going to show me this, and more, but not yet."

Alix blinked, clearing the picture, which disappeared quickly from her inner eye as though he'd turned a page in a book. She stared at herself in the mirror, trying to be impartial, give herself a chance. "The bra makes a difference."

She looked slimmer with her breasts held so firmly. They didn't droop, but their size needed firm support, and she had always sought out a practical, serviceable bra before. Not this sexy garment.

"Look at yourself. How can you possibly imagine that you have anything but a purely sexy body? You're not a tiny, ultra slim model type, but you are gorgeous. Your skin feels unbelievable." He slid his hands around and over her stomach, pausing to circle her navel with one finger. "Can you feel that? How wonderful that feels?"

Amazingly, she could. Touching her own skin was mainly practical, only done when she needed to wash herself or perform another practical function. She had never touched herself for pleasure, but now, she felt her own skin through another person. Smooth, silky, a feast for his hands.

"I don't think I'll ever tire of touching you." He bent and placed a soft kiss on her shoulder. She felt it from both sides, the little thrill in her own body and the sensation of soft skin against his lips.

"This is incredible."

"Mmm." He lifted his head and confronted her again, gazing into her eyes through the medium of the mirror. He slid his hands down to her panties and slid his thumbs into the sides, easing them down just a little. "God, that looks so good!"

She felt his approval, his desire, actually felt it. How could her own body turn her on?

"Don't ask, just accept." He lifted his hands and skimmed them down her legs, bending at the knee so he could slide his hands all the way down to her ankles.

She felt it, the soft silk warmed by her body. Incredible.

"Perfectly incredible, gorgeous." He circled her ankles with his hands. "So slender, too! Did you ever notice that?"

She shook her head. She couldn't face her image and not feel his approval, his desire. Her waist did curve enticingly, and her stomach, slightly rounded, didn't concern her as much as she thought it would. Her hair, freshly brushed and shining lay on her shoulders.

No bones. That thought must have been from him. She'd never been bony in her life, didn't know what it could feel like. *Not as good as you.* The intimate whisper made her shiver.

He kissed her shoulder again, a soft, sweet kiss, but this time he didn't stop, pressing gentle kisses to her upper arm before attending to her shoulder blades. *I can feel how much you like this, and where you're most sensitive. Keep your mind open, sweetness, let me feel your pleasure.*

When he kissed the small of her back, she shuddered, exquisitely sensitized by his whispers in her mind, and the warmth of his hands and mouth on her skin. He moved to the front, knelt before her, kissing and tonguing her navel while his hands moved to cup her breasts, resting his thumbs on her nipples.

"Oh, Dev!"

When she closed her eyes, he reprimanded her. *Watch yourself, Alix. Watch us. Know why I feel like this about you, see what beauty you're offering me.*

She opened her eyes. He knelt before her, his hair glossy in the light, his large hands cupping her breasts and tweaking her nipples into hypersensitivity. His mouth caressed, sucked and licked.

Reach around. Unclip the bra.

Her mind hazed with delight, Alix did as he bid her, and let the bra fall down her arms and off. His hands cupped flesh now. With the support of his hands, her breasts looked almost-acceptable.

His hands dropped away as though he'd heard her. She closed her eyes.

No! Open your eyes!

Her eyes snapped open, and as though seeing it for the first time, she saw her body. He hooked his thumbs in her thong and this time pulled it all the way down. With a soft kiss to her belly he stood, sliding his hands up her body, from ankles to breasts, then stepped around her to the back. "Just look at that. Dreams personified. My dreams."

The garter belt and black stockings formed a frame for the inverted triangle of dark curls between her legs. Alix had never dreamed of something like this, standing naked and unashamed in front of a mirror, a fully dressed man caressing her, worshipping her. She

never imagined not feeling embarrassed, but she didn't. Only incredibly aroused.

He touched her stomach, her breasts, cupped them in his hands. "They feel wonderful, *cariad*. Turn to the side now." With his hands gently guiding her, she turned so she was in profile to the mirror, Dev in front of her but standing apart so she could see her own body unobstructed.

He took one hand off her breast, and slid it down her back to her bottom. "That is such a beautiful feeling." She shivered with the sensation. He kissed her shoulder. "I can't stop touching your skin, any way I can." She felt it, his ripple of pleasure when he touched her, when he kissed her. He whispered, his breath heating her. "When you're as close as we are now, mind to mind, there are no lies. Everything I am is wide open to you, Alix. Take what you need. I'm all yours. As you are mine."

"Yes," she hissed out a breath as he dipped his head to her breast and traced an aching gentle path around her nipple with his tongue. "Oh, Dev, yes!" He took her nipple into his mouth and sucked.

Feeling wicked, she snuck a glance into the mirror and the sight made her weak. This extraordinarily attractive man wanted her, really wanted her. His suction increased, his mouth opened wider, and his touch firmed on her body. At the same time, she felt the simmering passion inside her, feeding her desire, surge up. His hands curled around her, his fingers slipping down over her bottom, pausing to knead, and then further down.

When he touched her she nearly exploded, and without him taking his mouth away from her breast, she heard his voice, raw and open. *Oh yes, baby, oh yes, if you come for me now I'll love you forever!*

She came. A mixture of mind and body, his voice calling out encouragement only she could hear, his fingers between her legs from behind, one curling just into her vagina, another circling her clit with light, teasing touches, his mouth pulling at her breast. Only his hands held her up. Her vagina contracted around the tip of his finger and she called for him, his name, only "Dev, Dev!"

"Sweetheart, I'm here, I'm here." Somehow he stood, holding her close. She let him lift her and lay her on the bed, and when she opened her eyes, she saw him removing his clothes, carefully, as though he had all the time in the world. Her legs lay slightly open and he moved down, to give himself a better view. "That was the starter." He pulled off his shirt and let it drop. He moved to his fly, his hands busy but his eyes intent on her. "Now for the next course."

Before she realized what he meant, he dropped his pants, peeling off his tight boxers immediately after. He stepped out of them and came to her.

She wanted to slip the garter belt off, but he covered her hand. "No. Please. You look so sexy, *anywyl*, everything I want, everything I need is here, in this room, tonight."

In her mind, in her heart, part of her soul, she could deny him nothing because she knew he gave her everything he was.

More by accident than with any definite purpose, she reached out her hand and found the series of switches by the bed. She flicked a few at random, managing to dim the lights, switching off the overheads and turning on the smaller lights over the bed.

She watched him stand at the bottom of the bed, with a gaze she couldn't have misinterpreted if she lived to be a hundred. His eyes glowed, the red sparks enhancing the growing empathy building between them. He lifted his hand and removed his glasses. "I don't need to see any further than this. Thank you." He set them aside on the desk and bent to her, crawling up the bed and stopping at her groin.

The knowledge of what he was about to do made Alix moan in need. Slowly he

dipped his head, touched her with his tongue and she felt him change. His tongue grew slimmer and longer, reaching delicately like a slender finger around her clit, the twin tips of the barb caressing gently.

"Oh God!" He wrapped his tongue around her clit, bringing the tip to caress and tease at the top. She felt him doing it, before her mind gave way to emotion and pure sensation.

Less like an explosion, more like falling into an abyss of gentle, warm, fluffy clouds until something like a spark of lightning drove her back up, to peak impossibly high, screaming his name over and over.

His groans told her he was in her mind, sharing and giving. When he released her it was almost a relief, until he slid up her body, lying over her, his cock nestling between her thighs, touching but not entering.

She opened her eyes to meet his, soft and reflecting the passion she knew she must be showing him in her own. The corners of his mouth crinkled in a smile. "That's better."

He didn't plunge inside her with abandon. No, instead he eased slowly forward, never taking his intent gaze away from hers, his mind firmly linked with hers. She couldn't have ejected his presence even had she wanted to. Which she didn't.

She felt him enter her, felt her body accept his. He slid deep into her body, into her mind, into her very being. Her whole existence contained him, embraced him.

When he grew inside her, she watched how the sensation affected him. His smiled slowly and dipped his head for a kiss. Thoroughly, completely, he possessed her mouth as he possessed the rest of her body, and she let him in, entering his in return.

Slow burn, passion banked down for their enjoyment. *I want to make this last. I want it to last forever.*

Yes!

With a sudden jerk of his hips he drove himself in the final inch and Alix came apart. Again. There, in his arms, hearing his voice echoing her pleasure, supporting and curling up with her. Every nerve ending in her whole body tingled, came alive like a handful of optic cables illuminated with the touch of a light source.

Only then did he begin to withdraw, only to thrust harder inside her, watching her arch up, her body following his involuntarily as his body called to hers.

He drew back, whispered, "Open your eyes, *cariad*."

The sound was almost an intrusion, but not quite. Instead, it intensified the request in her head and her eyes flickered open again to meet his, burning for her, sparks gleaming in the depths of the green. "Dev."

His smile returned, and he lifted off her body a little, giving him the traction he needed to drive down into her, impossibly deep, stretching her to accept him. "Alix!"

Time stopped, or started, or went into overtime. Her only sense of time was that steady plunge into her body, each time stimulating the sweet spot deep, deep inside, the one she'd never known existed, into fresh paroxysms of delight. Each time, the sensation went deeper into her body, her very being, driving those little fibers into ecstatic spikes of pure joy.

He felt it too. She didn't just believe it; she knew it, because she felt what it did to him. She felt her own wet, soft welcome, knew what it was doing to him, stimulating and energizing every nerve he had, spreading through him as it was through her.

She'd clutched the bedclothes under her hands as though this action would keep her anchored to the earth, but now she felt she'd go wherever he chose to take her and she deliberately released her hold, to lift her hands and curl them around his body. Running

her hands feverishly over his back, she felt his muscles working in harmony, tightening and releasing, driving her up and further up.

When she cupped his ass he gave a soft groan, and she felt his excitement peak inside her. "You like that," she murmured, her voice softer than she'd planned it to be.

"Oh yeah. Don't stop, sweetness. Touch me there. I'm all yours, wherever, whenever." He touched his lips to hers but then rose up again, redoubling his efforts.

Alix braced her feet flat on the bed, pushing up to him, meeting his thrusts with her own resistance, forcing him deeper and fully into her. His breathless laugh only fed her desire to work harder. Her spine curved up, until only her shoulders, bottom and feet touched the bed, and she cried out to him, beyond words now.

"I'm here, Alix, I'm here." His voice rose and choked off. He arched his upper body, driving hard into her, his mouth open, gasping. She felt the start of his climax, liquid fire pouring through him, centering on his balls, up through his cock into their point of joining.

He gasped and convulsed, completely out of control. His skin flickered with color, black jet gleaming, flickering, as though it was hard for him to maintain control of his shape, as though his body had taken complete control.

Transfixed, fascinated, Alix watched, participated. Loved.

She must have slept, because when she opened her eyes she was curled up in his arms, her garter belt and stockings gone, and he'd covered them with a sheet and comforter. He welcomed her back with a soft kiss. "That was an added bonus. I got to watch you sleep."

"How long was I gone?"

"Not long. About half an hour." He lifted up on one elbow, gazing down at her with a soft expression she hesitated to put a meaning to. She might be wrong, and that would be excruciating for them both.

"Thank you."

He raised a dark brow. "For what?"

"For showing me that I can be attractive to some people."

"Oh that. That was no trouble." He traced a line from her throat to the top of her breast, and down around her ribcage. "If you give this a chance, I'll convince you of it."

"What do you mean?" Despite trying to damp it down, hope still rose to challenge all her assumptions. There were so many reasons to wave him goodbye and post this in her mind as a happy memory. They lived half a world apart. They had different lives. He was a playboy, unlikely to stay with anyone for long, burned twice, too wary to commit. He was older than she was. Much, much older. He was a dragon. "How can we?"

"*Cariad*, we're compatible. I can convert you if you want me to."

Now fear, real fear clutched at her heart. While she wanted to relearn, to rethink her beliefs, it wouldn't come all at once and she felt revulsion as well as apprehension.

He smiled. "You don't have to make a decision immediately. Let's get to know each other first. I need you to say yes, that's all."

"Yes to what?"

"Only what every girlfriend says yes to. To see more of me, to let me take you out, to take me out once in a while, and to stay in with me from time to time." His eyes glowed. He was no longer in her mind, but she didn't have to be a mind reader to know he was thinking about what had passed between them half an hour ago.

"How can I? We live on opposite sides of the world."

"Not necessarily." He sighed, and the light left his eyes. His hand stilled in its meandering path over her body. "After this is over, they'll come looking for you. The PHR. You know that, don't you?"

She swallowed and nodded. "I thought I'd take martial arts classes. Or perhaps the FBI will put me in the witness protection program." She wasn't entirely joking.

"You could do that." He paused. "But you don't want to, do you? Who in their right mind would? Here's what you can do. You have several choices." Lifting his hand, he stroked back a strand of her hair, lingering to twine a strand around his finger. He watched his finger, bound now, instead of her, as though he avoided looking at her. "You could let Takàsc take care of you. He will introduce you to other members of your family, other Sorcerers. You'd be with your own. It doesn't mean we couldn't meet occasionally. I do spend a fair amount of time in New York, running auctions, doing jobs for Cristos, so we could still see each other sometimes."

That sounded like something he would want. Nothing too serious, a passionate affair when they happened to be in the same place at the same time. No commitments, no real involvement.

She couldn't do that. She loved him too much to let him go, possibly to share him with other women. That would tear her in two, and she couldn't do it. "Dev, I'm not sure—"

He wouldn't let her finish. "Or you don't have to see me at all." He stopped talking, stopped moving, just stared at the coil of hair he'd wound tightly around his finger. Then he took a deep breath and looked up. "Or you could marry me and let me convert you to a wyvern. I want you to stay with me. When we've completed the operation, I want to take you home, to England, where I can take care of you. Like it or not, you'll need someone close until you've built your own protection. I can teach you that." He paused. "Does that sound good?"

"Yes, but—" Alix caught her breath. The sincerity in his eyes was unmistakable, but she was so inexperienced with men, so out of her depth here! Dev was everything she'd dreamed of having—but how could he have dreamed about someone like her? She bit back her first response, an automatic denial of her own appeal to a sex god like him. Hadn't he just shown her how much she turned him on?

She found another response. "You don't know me. You can't possibly know me enough to want to marry me."

He lifted his hand and touched her temple. "I've been in here. Nobody knows you as well as I do. You've done me the immense compliment of allowing me in, without hindrance."

"Takàsc went in, too."

"He was careful to discover only what he needed to know, go only as far as he had to."

"How do you know that?"

He slid his finger down her face and curved his hand to cup her cheek. "Takàsc is a very accomplished Sorcerer, and an introverted man. I am neither. I want you very much, Alix. I felt it when I first walked into your shop, but it could have been sexual attraction, pure and simple. Then, the first time we made love, I felt the birthmark heat up and I knew it was more than that. But all that meant was that we were physically compatible. I had to know, Alix, I *had* to know. I couldn't bear not knowing. So when you gave your

permission, I took it all."

She swallowed. "You mind raped me?"

He winced and closed his eyes for a brief moment. "Please don't say that. I knew I was taking liberties, more than you realized. I knew I should be a gentleman and not take advantage of you, but I promised myself I would never take advantage of what I learned. *That* would have been mind rape. I never influenced you, never used any of the techniques I've learned to make you sleep with me. That was always your choice. And I've kept out of your mind unless you specifically asked me. Or unless you broadcast." He smiled. "Which you do quite often, as it happens. You really have to learn to keep it all inside. You probably influence people without realizing you're doing it."

"Can you teach me?"

He nodded. "It's quite easy, really. But I want your decision first." He slid his hand down to her shoulder, reached down and pulled the bedcovers up to cover her. The small protective gesture warmed her in more ways than just physically. "I promise to abide by whatever you decide. I won't complain. But you should also know that I won't give up, not until I know you're sure you could never accept me and what I have to offer."

She blinked, again biting back her self deprecating response. "Am I your soul mate, something like that?"

He laughed this time, softly intimate. "No, sweetheart, there's no such thing. Although it's rare, I could find several more women compatible with the conversion process. That's a physical thing. But I want *you*. Not because of the compatibility—that's a bonus—God, what a bonus! But because I have truly fallen in love with you. I'm sure. Are you?"

She had to shake her head. "How can I be sure? We haven't known each other very long." She reached out for his hand, which he'd withdrawn. He linked his fingers with hers, his gaze intent on her face. "There's so much for me to get used to. Yes, you are very attractive to me, and I like you very much but I have so much to get used to." That was the truth, the honest truth and she owed it to both of them to tell him.

He sighed. "Of course. I'm rushing things. I suppose I should thank God you didn't throw me out of bed for scaring you. So you'd prefer to take it easy." She nodded. "Of course you would." He smiled, but she could tell it was forced. "In that case, I'll just ask you not to lock me out of your life. You should go with Takàsc, let him and his relatives meet you and teach you. You have great psychic strength locked up inside that gorgeous body." The smile became less forced. "For your own protection you need to learn how to control it. Then, if you really want to continue to ignore it, you can do it safely."

"Will I be allowed to ignore it?" She felt drawn, against her will, yet again. "For the first part of my life I was made to listen and believe things that didn't come naturally to me, things I always thought were wrong, but because I loved the people who were telling me these things, I believed them. Or pretended to. Clay was the only person who trusted me enough to let me pull away, at least a little. He wanted to continue to live in the community, to found another, but for my sake he came to New York and helped me to live my dream." A dream that was now in ashes. She couldn't go back to running her jewelry store, could never return to her life as it had been before the events of the last few days. To keep her mind away from those thoughts, remembering what she had lost and would never get back, she kept talking. "I was happy, Dev. I made my own decisions and I could live my own life. Now another set of people want me to join them, to fight the good fight. And

I don't know what I should do."

Despite her determination, tears sprang to her eyes but she blinked them away, angry for the self-pity that welled up in her.

"No, no, don't cry." Gently he drew her closer, so their lower bodies touched, entwined and slipped his arm around her waist. "Nobody wants that. You have to want it, too. That's why most of us, shapeshifter, vampire and all the rest, don't usually sign on with one of the agencies or another. All these agencies offer their allegiance to a country, and that isn't what we do. We support each other, and these places give us a place to meet and discuss. But also a place to contact each other. If we're to survive, if we're not to be ostracized, treated as different, we have to offer a little co-operation. But most of us are consultants or specialists, people on the fringes. To join the CIA, or MI6, or any of the other agencies, we would have to swear allegiance above our own allegiances to our families and communities, and few of us will do that."

"Few?"

"There are some," he murmured. "Some who feel they do the job best from inside the organization. Some who feel they owe more than the occasional joint operation. Others want to rule the world. They are stronger, sure, but are they better?" He shook his head. "No, just different." He stroked the curve of her waist with his thumb, and she felt the growing warmth, gentle but sure, building again between them. "All we want to do is teach you to use your considerable abilities safely, both for your own sake and for those about you. What you do with them is completely up to you. You can buy another jewelry store, or even carry on with the one you have, once all this is behind you." He gave her a wry smile. "I want you, Alix, I want you for my own, but that's not the only choice you have."

Could she really? When the possibility was dangled before her, Alix had another realization. Did she want to? Did she want to go back?

The truth was, she didn't know. There was so much more to learn first. And there was something else. Someone else. "Dev, I don't want to lose you, but you live in England, and I don't. You're a wyvern, and I'm not. So many things. I don't know how we'd manage."

He laughed shortly. "We can sort something out. I'm Triscombe's old master expert, the head of department, and I can more or less choose where I live, as long as I'm available for the big sales and consultations. I already travel a lot. But if you say yes, I want it all. Marriage and conversion. I want children with you eventually, or at least the possibility of them, and since I can't convert to Sorcerer, you have to convert to becoming a wyvern. I don't want to see another woman I love age and die long before I do. You have to be aware of that, Alix. If you can't do that, then we'll have to part."

Although his voice was steady, she felt his despair, and understood him. But she couldn't make the decision. She loved him, and thanks to his loving, she was beginning to love herself, too. Would she put that in jeopardy if she converted as he wanted her to? "What would conversion mean? I mean I know I'd become a-wyvern, like you, but what else?"

He stroked her waist and lower down over the top of her buttocks, and the light in his eyes became more than friendly, glowing with renewed desire. "You'd have an increased lifespan. You'd have to change to the wyvern at least once a month. You'd keep your Sorcerer abilities, the amazing Psi strength you have locked inside you. And you'd be able to have my children. We aren't as fertile as ordinary humans, but few species are, but

we should be able to manage at least two. After that, you'd probably become sterile. It happens to most of our women." His voice was steady but she knew him better now, felt the tremor he couldn't stop in his mind. He truly wanted children. With her.

Children. Lord, she didn't know if she could look after herself, much less children! But if she loved him. Yes, she loved him. She was just afraid it wouldn't last, that it would fade, and how could she stay five hundred years with a man she didn't love?

Five hundred years.

"Would we be bound?"

He sighed. "I'd like us to be, but no. Conversion is a physical thing, not a mental one or anything spiritual. You could leave me, find someone else, if you wanted to."

He bent his head and kissed her, a kiss filled with sweetness and love, but when passion began to spark between them he pulled away. "I love you, Alix, and I won't change my mind. But you need to know it, too. So I'll wait. As long as it takes, *cariad*."

She lay in his arms and confessed. "Right now I can't imagine wanting to do that. Right now all I want is you, and for us to make love all night long."

So they did. All night long.

Chapter Eleven

Dev watched Alix while he dressed. They'd breakfasted in bed together, taking turns feeding each other morsels, exchanging gentle, loving kisses and he'd left her to go and shower. He'd thought of carrying her with him, but decided against it, preferring to watch her lie in the bed they'd shared, tousled and relaxed from their loving, the scent of their lovemaking still redolent in the room.

She hadn't blasted his hopes of doing this again, though he felt sure she would slip away from him. When he saw her next, she'd be more confident, sure of her abilities, happier. While he couldn't be anything but glad for her, he wanted to be the man by her side, watching her transform, helping her if she wanted him to. That was, he reminded himself, unlikely.

As things stood, he'd have to love her from a distance. Perhaps for a long time. When he saw her again, she might not want him as she had wanted him last night. He wouldn't blame her. But he would never stop loving her.

After protecting himself from hurt for so long, he'd fallen again, and fallen hard. He couldn't regret it, even if she grew away from him. Last night was worth any pain.

He loved the way she watched him dress, sleepily, with a glow in her eyes he remembered putting there. They didn't speak much, or exchange mental comments, more than a mutual glow. For this morning, they were in love, no ifs or buts or maybes. It would have to keep him happy for a long time.

"That's a nice suit," she murmured, her voice purring into the companionable silence.

He brushed his hand over the trousers, straightening the centre seam. "Saville Row. I go to a tailor there. It is one of the best I have, but I'm on show today, in more ways than one." He grinned. "Triscombe's have left stacks of messages on my phone. They'll be so glad to see me they'll forgive me anything."

"Have you called them?"

His smile widened. "Yes. Said I'd had some personal business to attend to, but I'd be there for the sale." He picked up his watch from the vanity, checking the time. "As it is, I'll probably be there an hour before the sale starts. They'll be having conniptions."

"Conniptions." She repeated the word slowly, rolling it around her tongue, reminding him what else she could do with her tongue. "That's a good word."

"It is when you say it." He strapped the Rolex around his wrist and picked up the other items he'd need, mentally checking them off as he always did. Credit cards, wallet, keycard, cell phone, CIA ID, PDA. After he'd put them away he checked his appearance in the mirror. It would do. Understated, as he preferred, but quality, as Triscombe's expected from any auctioneer taking a major sale. He wouldn't be on the podium all day, but it was his job to sell the major items. There was a Rubens coming up today, a luscious painting, one that hadn't been on the market for over a hundred years. One he'd worked very hard to persuade the owner to allow Triscombe's to sell.

"I wish I could see you working. Can't I come to the sale?"

"No. Perhaps another time." Far, far too dangerous. He would have agents in the audience, the team he'd been assigned and others, too, to catch whoever came to take him. He was as sure as he could be that they'd choose today. So was Cristos, so sure he'd arranged an escort to take Dev to the auction house before his day began. They would be

arriving any minute. "You can see me, though. When is Takàsc coming for you?" He tried to make the question light. She would never agree to the alternative. He wouldn't give himself to anyone else unless they decided to convert. He'd given her the choice, one that meant far more than she realized. He could only convert someone once in his life. If she wanted it, Alix would be that one.

"He said about noon. Ilona still feels queasy in the mornings. We'll be going straightaway. Dev, you will take care, won't you?"

He smiled. "Yes, of course I will. If only to spare you any more pain. I do my job, and the others take the risks. They'll take whoever comes for me. I won't be in any danger."

"Please, Dev, if you take Clay —"

He crossed the room in two swift strides, to sit on the bed and take her hand in his. "I promise we'll do our best not to hurt him. We'll take him, we'll talk to him. We can't let him contact his friends, of course, but apart from that, there's no reason why he should be harmed. I swear it, *cariad*."

Because he could and because he couldn't resist, he leaned forward to kiss her, tangling his fingers in her hair. With all his heart, he wanted to go back a few hours, to when she lay beneath him, or he lay beneath her. He wanted to stay, to explore, to love her until she gave in and agreed to marry him, to accept his offer, to bind her life with his.

"You can see me work." He smiled when he saw her cynical look. "This is a big sale, sweetheart, and it's being televised. If the hotel has cable, try channel 111. That's the auction and antiques network, and that's where we'll be. Many of the bids will be telephoned in, so our customers can watch the sale while they bid, but it's not just for them. This is a big sale so the media will be there. I'm due on the podium at eleven."

She smiled back at him, her eyes dark, warm pools he wanted to drown in. "I'll be there. Is it a date?"

"It's a date."

"What then? What happens when you have them?"

He straightened up. "We'll question them, find out as much as we can. If they aren't amenable to questioning, the Sorcerers will deal with them."

"What does that mean?"

He frowned. "I don't know if I want to tell you."

Her grip on his hand tightened. "Tell me!"

There was no way out of telling her this. He wished she hadn't asked. "They will excise the parts of the mind and belief that include the PHR, once they've extracted the information we need."

"It will hurt?"

"Probably. Darling, this is war. They mean to take us, to harm us. All our actions up to now have been defensive, just to prevent our people being hurt, but the tide is turning. We may have to become offensive, to turn the tide. Public opinion has changed, too. It seems that they are less likely to accept us, not more. Because we won't declare loyalty to one country above all others, because we don't want to contribute to the wars between nations and religions, we will be turned out. Some politicians know what we are, and they're funding organizations like the PHR. It may get worse before it gets better."

"Dev, I'm an American. I don't know if I could take sides."

A taut smile flickered at his lips. He loved her honesty. "No one will make you. At least we won't. If you feel the best way is for you to serve your country, then you must do

so. You won't be alone. There are some of us who feel that way."

"Do you?"

He could only be honest in return. "No. I'm old enough to see what war does to countries and people." A small boy during the First World War, a participant in the second, sure he was on the side of right, but even then, he had seen some things that made him ashamed of his own country. Old enough to know there was no black, no white.

"Yes. I guess you are."

He stood up, unable to put his departure off any longer. "I'll come and see you as soon as I can. If I may."

"I want you to."

He turned to face her, knowing he had to tell her. "It may not be for a while." Her face paled. He knew what she was thinking. The self deprecation introduced and encouraged by the cult and her family would lead her to believe he didn't want to see her. It wasn't true. More than anything in the world he wanted to hold her, love her, guide her in this new, frightening life she found before her. Not because she needed it. She didn't. She had an inner strength she was hardly aware of, the strength that had led her to break away from the PHR that had helped her pursue her dream of her own jewelry store. No, he needed it. When she was gone, there would be a void in his life that no one else would ever fill. "They may wish to send you to a teacher, and to be a Sorcerer they will want you isolated for a time, without contact. I don't know what will happen, but they are good people. They'll care for you. But I'm not a Sorcerer, not an ounce of Nadasdy blood in my veins, so I won't be able to visit you."

He throat moved as she swallowed. "I see. I'm not sure I'll want that."

"You need it." He badly wanted to hold her again, but he stood still, half way between the bed and the door. "You have to do this if you're to achieve your full potential."

"How long will it take?"

"I don't know. It varies. I'll wait for you to contact me. I've left you my numbers." He picked up a sheet of paper from the vanity. At one point last night, when she'd been asleep, he'd left the bed to visit the bathroom and when he'd returned, he watched her for a while before waking her to love her again. While he'd sat, he'd made the list for her. He never wanted her to wonder how to contact him. "I've given you my numbers, in Wales, in London, and the numbers at Triscombe's. Please use them one day."

She caught her breath in an audible gasp. "Isn't that dangerous? To leave all your phone numbers when they're looking for you?"

"For you, no. I know you'll look after them for me."

She lifted the sheet, giving him a glimpse of heaven and climbed out of bed, crossing the room and taking the paper from his hand. "I'll memorize them, and destroy the paper. Like a secret agent."

He couldn't resist. Sliding his arms around her he felt as if he'd come home. "I wish we could stay here for a month, or as long as it takes for you to believe you know me well enough to accept my offer. I want you, Alix, I'll always want you." He moved his head just a little, to meet her lips with his.

It was as though they'd gone back in time. Alix, naked in his arms, willing, passionate, sharing a kiss as incendiary as any they'd shared the night before. He had to drag himself away. "I'll always be there for you. Give my regards to Takàsc and his sister. And my thanks for keeping you safe."

Picking up his briefcase, walking past the rack of clothes, still untouched from the night before, he left the room, not letting her see the tears in his eyes.

Triscombe's was its usual bustling self on the day of a big sale. Whichever branch it was, New York, Paris, London, the bristling atmosphere never failed to excite Dev. Customers, some dressed in the best Fifth Avenue could offer, some in jeans and sweaters, entered through the big front doors, thrown wide open for easy access. Dev knew from experience that the biggest spenders could be the ones in jeans. The biggest spenders probably wouldn't be there at all. They'd be at the end of the phone. He avoided eye contact, but some people still called his name, old customers or people who'd seen his picture in the media, escorting one beautiful woman or another to some glamorous function. Well those days had gone, unless Alix wanted to go to glamorous functions. He was no longer available.

He exchanged nods but didn't stop, going straight through the door to the staff quarters after a glance at the cool looking young woman on reception. His first stop was when someone called his name from the workshops, a place he hadn't expected to enter on sale day.

It was Trevor, one of the restorers Triscombe's employed. For initial exploration of lots brought in, or to clean up lesser priced lots, one of the in-house restorers took on the job. They sent out the more complex, expensive work to experts. Dev smiled at the restorer, his clothes festooned with stains, varnish, paint or one of the chemicals used for pigment analysis.

"Morning, Trevor, is it important? Only I'm a little late, and due on the podium in an hour." Dev took a deep breath, grounding himself in the smell of linseed oil and acetone, two of the staples of the workshops and as familiar to him as his own aftershave.

"Not sure. It's about those paintings Ms. Lancaster and her brother brought in last week."

At once, Dev's interest sharpened. He'd forgotten all about the pictures. He remembered the paintings, three agricultural naives of pigs and a possible genre painting. Perhaps Alix had been in possession of an unknown Rembrandt, or a der Hooch. Stranger things had happened. If she was, it would ensure her future for her. "What about them?"

"The pigs are genuine, as far as I can tell. Great paintings, reasonable condition. The last one, the interior, is a Victorian copy of a der Hooch. I did some tests on the pigments, and they're all nineteenth century or later." Dev's heart sank. He would have loved to have given Alix a nest egg, even if it had to be a farewell gift. Well, at least he'd got the artist right.

Trevor held out a torn piece of paper to him. "This, though, was tucked in the back. I can't make sense of it, but your client might want it back." He frowned and tilted his head to one side, as Dev had seen him do when he studied a work of art. "You all right? You seem a bit on edge."

"Big sale today." Dev took the paper and pushed his glasses up his nose with one finger.

Trevor's face cleared. "Oh yes, I'd forgotten today's your day. The Rubens, right?"

"That's right," Dev said absently, his attention on the paper.

Bingo. Unless he was very much mistaken, these three words were the words of power that activated the pendant. His mind went back to that first evening in the apartment. He'd seen the painting on the wall, asked if he could take that, too. A handy

place to hide something, if the frame was a bit loose.

The words must have come with the pendant into Clay's possession, and he slipped them into the back of the painting, between the canvas and the frame. He could only pray Clay hadn't memorized the words, as he was doing now, or he didn't realize their significance.

The words were enough to tell Dev they were in dangerous territory. This was a major jewel of power. It could kill, it could also control. If the holder knew the words of power and knew how to use them. Without the words, it would still have some effect, as it contained the blood of a wyvern, one of his family and it couldn't help but draw them to it.

That might be how Clay wanted to use it. As a magnet. But without the words, it was a weak one, and could be resisted. With the words—no way.

Stuffing the paper into his pocket, Dev waved a cheery goodbye to Trevor, who took no notice, having returned to the painting on the easel, a charming eighteenth century portrait, Dev noted absently.

He climbed the stairs to his office, or rather, the one he used when he was in New York. Since he controlled all Triscombe's old master sales, every branch of the firm had a place prepared for him. This was a small office containing three desks, only one of which was occupied. He nodded to the woman, Triscombe's Impressionist expert here in New York and absent mindedly smiled his thanks at her good luck wishes. He switched on the laptop, put in his password and checked his email.

Nothing of note, either from the London office or from Department Fifty-Seven. Checking his watch, he smiled at the porter who entered. "Morning, Rivers. Full house?"

"Standing in the aisles," the porter replied. Dev took the remote on his desk and after a nod of permission from the Impressionist lady whose name he tried to remember, flicked on the screen in the corner.

The sale was already under way, the podium occupied. This was the cable TV company that had an arrangement with Triscombe's to televise important sales. It had been lucrative to both sides. The TV company sold the footage of particularly newsworthy sales to the larger networks and Triscombe's was spared the bother of setting up cameras for sales and so on. That also helped with security, as most of the cameramen and staff were well known to the staff. Less likely anyone would be able to intrude into a vulnerable position. Usually, that meant potential thieves but today Dev was much more concerned with the PHR.

He spotted Svetlana's flame-red hair. She sat near the front. It took a few minutes to spy the vampire, Andreas Constant, sitting near the back. Laurie Friedland sat in vulgar splendor at the front, difficult to miss. Dev smiled when he remembered the quietly dressed, friendly man from the day before. This was a footballer, supremely in control of his body, dressed in a purple shirt and dark purple suit, bling adorning his cuffs, wrist and a heavy chain just visible at his neck. His blond hair, which had sat in a flat, neat style the day before stood up in stiff, gelled spikes. Laurie was obviously well into his sportsman persona today. Dev smiled and noted the lot number of the painting being sold, gathered up his thoughts and prepared for what he mentally labeled 'showtime.'

Dev didn't like the applause that greeted him when he took his seat at the podium. It took attention away from the paintings, and turned the whole affair into a circus. However, it did boost the price sometimes, so he put up with that, and the consequent media attention. At least some of the press were beginning to call him an 'ex-playboy,' an image he wanted gone as soon as possible. Especially now he'd met the woman he knew

he wanted for the rest of his life. He didn't need to play any more.

He kept his greeting brief but cordial, not acknowledging anyone in the audience in particular. When they appeared in the house on sale days, the big spenders didn't appreciate too much attention. Most of them were on the end of phones, or represented by someone else. Dev spotted a few dealers in the crowd, some representatives from museums and guessed the bidding for the Rubens would be keen. However, there were about twenty lots before the big one.

He got his section of the sale underway. Nobody from the PHR, as far as he could see. Usually he kept his mental abilities tucked away when he was here. You could never tell who would be here, who would pick up on him if he used it, but today he had no choice. He opened a private channel and contacted the others in the team, calling them by name. They all responded, although the three he could see showed no outward sign. Good. That meant they were comfortable with their powers. They knew what they were doing. There'd been no time the day before for elaborate introductions. He'd just had to trust Cristos to come up with the best team he could find in the time. Not that Dev would trust any of them more than he had to before he knew them better.

A flash. Someone had taken a photograph. Strictly forbidden, because it damaged the art and because of the TV company who had the monopoly. They knew better than to use flash. Dev came on the alert, just in case, but the camera was removed and the person gently shown the exit. Someone else took the empty chair.

Standing room only today. Every crimson upholstered chair was occupied, and the back of the room tight with other people standing shoulder to shoulder. Dev extended his senses. He couldn't sense anyone with Psi abilities, apart from the team. The team was in place, and Cristos had stationed some regular CIA agents around the building, just in case. The attack would come when he was leaving the podium, he was sure. He settled to selling.

Showered and dressed, all signs of the previous night's passion gone, Alix settled in a chair to watch Dev doing his job. She found the channel and saw him, immaculate in dark charcoal wool, his glasses glinting in the bright TV lights, sitting at the podium, smoothly conducting the sale. He interspersed a few jokes, spoke to the audience as though he knew them all personally. She hadn't realized how much showmanship was involved in auctioneering, but she'd never watched an auctioneer at work too closely before.

Seeing him like this, immaculate, handsome, in his element, Alix wondered how he could ever be attracted to her. But she was glad of it. Last night had been wonderful, the best of her life, spent with a man who made it clear he loved her body and her mind. How long for she still had her doubts, but she wouldn't have traded last night for anything. Not even the fabled Rubens Dev was due to sell soon.

When her cell phone rang she was shocked enough to leap to her feet, jolted out of her contemplations, but she found it in her purse and answered it before it had stopped ringing. She didn't recognize the number, but knew the voice. "It's Cristos. Are you all right this morning?"

"Fine." She hadn't thought she'd talk to him today, but she might have guessed he'd check on her, make sure she was okay.

"There's been a delay. Ilona Takàsc wasn't feeling too good this morning, so Vencel didn't want to set out for Montana straight away. He took her to the hospital and he's

getting her checked out."

"The baby?"

Cristos chuckled. "The baby's fine. Vencel's more like a mother hen than a proud brother." Alix couldn't imagine the darkly handsome, imposing Takàsc fussing like a chicken. It created a very amusing mental image, one she thought Cristos had meant to impart. He must have noticed her reticence around the Sorcerer. "He's driving Ilona mad with his fussing." His voice turned grim. "Considering the circumstances that is hardly surprising."

"Can you tell me anything about it? Was it the PHR?"

"We don't know. It seems as though Ilona's husband was a victim of a street mugging, but who knows? The FBI is looking into it, but they've got nowhere yet. That in itself makes me suspicious. They usually have some idea. Ilona is coping remarkably well. She says the child gives her a reason to go on. Her husband wasn't a Talent, just an ordinary mortal, so either they were trying to get at Ilona and her family, or it was really the casual attack it seemed to be."

"It's so sad." Whatever had caused his death, he was gone, never to return.

"Yes it is. Being a Talent doesn't make you a saint, any more than being a human does. There are personal implications, things I can't really tell you about that make this case doubly sad. But Vencel has agreed to postpone any search for the murderers until the baby is born."

He sighed. "But at least the delay gives you a chance to watch Wyvern at work. Are you watching?"

"Yes, I just switched on."

"I won't keep you long then. Didn't want you to worry. Don't leave the hotel room on your own. Takàsc will pick you up from there, and I'm sending someone over to sit and watch, a deterrent and a safeguard."

"Thanks. I'm a bit overwhelmed by all this bodyguard stuff."

Cristos' tone became softer, sympathetic. "I know. Hopefully it won't be necessary for long. But I want to take out this cell and find out who else knows about you before I sound the all clear. Oh yes, one more thing. I forgot to send any luggage for you."

She started to protest. She'd selected some underwear and a plain t-shirt, together with a pair of jeans to wear, but she didn't mean to take any of the other clothes. She'd get her own back from the apartment, get Cristos to send somebody over for them. She couldn't accept these, beautiful though they were. "I can't accept—"

"Yes you can. Take what you like. I'll bill the Agency. I'm sending a man over, but don't open the door until he says "Scarlet Empress." Got that?"

"Scarlet Empress," she repeated dutifully. "Okay."

"He'll bring a selection of luggage for you to use. Alix, I mean it, take what you want, not just what you need. It's for you. Some small compensation for losing your previous life."

Despite the generosity, Alix couldn't be happy. "I'd give it all up if I knew Clay was safe."

Cristos sighed gustily. "I know. I'm so sorry. I promise we'll do our best to take him alive and not to hurt him. And I'll keep you informed of his progress."

"Thanks."

She hung up. Still watching Dev, she crossed the room to the rack of clothes, and began to sort through them, trying to decide what he would like, but she forgot that when

she came across the kind of dress she'd always wanted but hadn't had the courage to buy for herself before. There were some she positively hated, but she found plenty she loved and by the time the voice from the TV said, in hushed tones, "And here it is. The Rubens," she'd selected a number of garments and decided that if Vencel Takàsc was going to be late, she might be able to try some of them on.

Alix sat down to watch Dev sell the great painting. First, he stated the facts. "A mid period Rubens, dating to 1623, this was a mythological scene painted for Queen Marie de Medici of France, during the period of his great sequence of paintings, 'The Life of Marie de Medici.' Many experts consider this to be the high point of his life and career, and a painting from this period rarely comes to the open market." He paused and smiled a little, gazing at the canvas, set up on a stand by his side. The painting also appeared above his head, magnified on a screen. "The subject is mythological, depicting the story of the Rape of the Sabine Women, an earlier version of the great work he painted ten years later, which is in the collection of the National Gallery in London. The painting measures five feet by seven and is in excellent condition." His voice softened, became more intimate. "It is oil on canvas, and is a beautiful example of Rubens's work, from his finest period. Rubens loved to depict the female body in all its glorious abundance, and is one of the greatest painters of the nude who ever lived. However—"he turned away from the painting to smile at the audience"—as some of us have the privilege of knowing, it doesn't begin to compare to the real thing." A ripple of laughter ran through the room and for a heart-stopping moment, Dev looked straight into the camera. At her. Alix knew without a doubt he was referring to her. The camera focused in on the painting, at the generously endowed women in various states of dress and undress writhing in the arms of their captors.

They were much larger than she was and Alix suddenly realized what Dev was trying to tell her. Rubens, one of the greatest artists who ever lived, considered these women the epitome of beauty. Their flesh glowed where it creased at their waists, their breasts spilled over the arms of the men holding their bodies. Not every man loved a skinny woman. Some preferred abundance.

It was as something pressing on her for as long as she could remember fell away and her heart believed what Dev had told her all last night. She was beautiful. She could stand proudly by his side, believe what he believed.

If he wasn't killed today. If he came back to her. If he still wanted her.

What he'd given to her would last a lifetime. Confidence and love such as she'd never known before. Alix watched the screen.

After a joke about the number of nipples on display on daytime TV, Dev turned to serious matters and began the sale. Bidding was fierce and swift until it reached the seven million mark, when, according to a ticker at the bottom of the screen, the expected price was reached. Then it continued, steadily, until it reached 20 million dollars. The whispered commentary, which Alix could happily have lived without, started exclaiming. "Extraordinary! The record price for a Rubens is forty nine million dollars, reached a couple of years ago, but that was for a previously unknown work. This one is known, and the provenance is impeccable. It could go for more."

It did. All bidders in the room dropped out, and the bidding centered on two phone bidders. A blonde woman in black, black framed eyeglasses over her blue eyes against a balding man in a navy suit. They nodded in response to Dev's questions, tersely concentrating, murmuring the latest price into the receiver. Alix wondered if the buyers were in hotel rooms like this, watching, holding phone receivers to their ears with sweaty

hands, not daring to blink. The tension was powerful, so when the knock came on the door, Alix nearly jumped out of her skin.

She crossed to the door and took her eyes off the screen long enough to use the peephole. "Yes?"

"Luggage for you," a male voice replied and she saw a plump, short, middle aged man in loose fitting jeans and a polo shirt with a store logo on it.

What had Cristos said? Oh, yes. "Anything else?"

"I was told to say Scarlet Empress."

Yes. Alix opened the door and motioned the man to enter, taking the opportunity to peer up the corridor. A man in a dark suit sat in a chair a few doors away. He nodded to her. Cristos's man.

The delivery man wheeled in a vast selection of luggage in various colors and sizes. "Wait a minute, would you?" Alix crossed to the TV and was just in time to see Dev bring the hammer down. A small click and then a round of applause.

A number flashed across the bottom of the screen. Fifty seven million, three hundred dollars. He'd broken the record for a Rubens! Dev smiled, and bowed his head to acknowledge the applause, then sat patiently, waiting to continue the auction. The porters were carefully moving the Rubens and putting another painting in its place.

Alix caught a movement out of the corner of her eye and turned. What she saw brought her heart into her mouth. A large trunk set on its end yawned emptily open, and the man who'd brought the luggage lay unconscious on the floor. A man stood smiling at her. "I've come to take you back."

Ten lots later, the sale was over. Dev left the podium to back slapping and applause from Triscombe's staff, as he made his way back to his office. Warmth suffused him. It was good that the painting had gone to a gallery where the public could see it. That gorgeous work of art deserved to be seen. The price was shocking, except he'd had a shrewd idea it would fetch that much. The reserve had been set deliberately low, a come-on for investors. That had been his decision, and he'd been vindicated by the record price the painting had brought. His commission would be healthy. Triscombe's paid their top auctioneers a commission on the bigger sales, if price reserves were met, and this meant his position was secure. The Rubens was his baby. He'd persuaded the owners to use Triscombe's, he'd decided the sale would be in New York, he'd nursed the sale, contacted the primary buyers, overseen all the arrangements. He ought to be feeling even better, but the melancholy invading him never left him, not even for a moment when he'd brought the hammer down on the record price.

Alix. He missed her already. She would be on her way to Takàsc's ranch now. Even he didn't know where it was. Cristos knew, but wasn't telling, and he was the only person apart from Vencel and Ilona Takàsc and their immediate families who knew for sure. If he quartered the whole state of Montana, military style, took to the air, he wouldn't find it. He'd bet his commission that Takàsc had a concealing spell over the place.

He should be glad. Alix would be safer there than anywhere else. But he wanted to be there with her. Briefly, he wondered if he would have given up the sale today to go with her, had she asked him. No contest. He would have gone without a backwards glance.

In his office, his colleagues waited with champagne. Smiling, genuinely pleased with his success, he accepted a glass and waited while they toasted him. He made a little speech, modestly thanking all the people who'd helped him, and toasted them in return.

Before Dev could take a sip from his glass, his cell phone rang. Not the one he kept for the auction house and his everyday life. The other one.

With an apologetic grin, he left the room, murmuring something about family. As soon as he was out of earshot, he barked down the phone, "Yes?"

"I'm aborting the operation." Cristos, terse, his voice strained. "They weren't coming for you. They came for Alix."

"Jesus, what are you telling me here? Is she safe?"

A deep sigh, then; "No. They got her." Dev closed his eyes while his world fell apart around him. Everything crashed down, and concentrated into one central point. Only one thing mattered now. Getting Alix out to safety.

Cristos was still speaking. "Takàsc was delayed so I sent a man over to sit outside the room. Someone delivered luggage for her, someone I know and trust. But the luggage held a stowaway and he killed the bona fide man. While he dealt with the woman in the hotel room, someone else handled my man outside. We found an empty syringe in the room, so it's likely they injected Alix with some sleeping drug before they took her away. A man left shortly afterwards with some luggage, so she was probably in the trunk her attacker arrived in. It shouldn't have happened, but it did. We were blindsided."

There was no choice, nothing else he could do. "I'm going after her."

"Wait. They might still come for you."

Yes, they might. "Let them take me." At least Cristos wasn't trying to dissuade him. He probably realized it was useless.

"I've every intention of letting them do it, and I've given the team orders to hold back. But they'll follow you. It might even be better, having you on the inside with Alix."

Dev let go of a stream of obscenities. How could Cristos even think that? What did anything matter, if Alix was in danger? His immediate reaction was to go after her, but he was right in one thing; they might come for him. Let them come.

"Don't get carried away, Dev. We want them alive."

"Then they'd better not have hurt Alix." He cut the connection. He stood in a corridor, on his own. Nobody in sight. His gut twisted when he thought of the change of plans. How could Cristos have let it happen? Why had he left her?

Department Fifty-Seven or not, if the PHR hurt her, he'd cut a swathe through their damned society. Kill as many as he could before they took him down. Society could put a veneer on him, but at heart, he was a wyvern, a creature of legend, bringing death and vengeance to whoever crossed him. And by God, he would make sure of it!

He whipped around when he heard footsteps, but it was the team. Quickly, he beckoned towards an empty office and closed the door behind them. Everyone else was celebrating in his office.

"You heard?"

"Yes." The vampire Andreas Constant moved towards the desk, sitting on the corner of the heavy, old fashioned piece of furniture. "We're very sorry. Surprised as well."

"I want her back. Nothing matters more than that." Dev turned in time to see Svetlana and Laurie exchange sympathetic glances. He wanted to snap at them, but he needed them on his side so he chose to take no notice. He had just enough self control left for that. But not much more.

"Cristos has agreed. If they come for me, you let them take me. I need to get to her, and that is the fastest way." For a moment, he had a mental picture of Alix, alone and

confused. He would get to her if he had to break in.

"Let's think practically." The vampire lifted his hand and rested it on his knee, enough movement to attract attention. "They know what you are, Wyvern. They saw you shift. They may have proof of it. You knocked the cameras out, took the hard drive from their computer, but you can't guarantee they hadn't transmitted pictures elsewhere. They may know how to handle you. Shouldn't one of us go in instead? I'm a vampire, Fabrice here is a Sorcerer. Different Talents."

"They won't be looking for you."

Constant sighed. "True. What do you think they know?"

"They still have the jewel of power, but I don't know if they know what it is. I do. I found out this morning." He swallowed. "I haven't had time to tell Cristos, but one of you should tell him. I know the words that will activate the jewel. They'll break the center jewel and release the blood."

"Whoa! How long have you known the words?"

"Since a few minutes before the sale. Our restorer found them in one of the paintings from the Lancaster apartment. Since Alix didn't know anything about it, we have to assume her brother knows, or at least knows the words exist and their significance."

"Shit."

Fabrice smiled. "Yeah, right. We have to get the jewel back."

"I'll leave that up to you." Dev only had one aim. Once Alix was safe, then he'd worry about the jewel. Unless it turned up while he was getting her out. After he had her back, then he'd worry about the jewel. He drew the scrap of paper out of his pocket. "Who wants this? It gives power over the jewel. I suggest a non-shifter take it, someone the words won't affect, memorize it and destroy the paper. Just in case I'm killed."

"You won't be killed." Constant leaned forward and snatched the paper, grunting when he saw the words. "I've got these." He held the paper up, concentrated and watched the paper glow and burn, dropping the remains into the waste basket. "Anything else?"

Dev thought for a moment. "I have the shapeshifter's allergy to opiates." He glanced at the griffin in time to see the sympathetic grimace and he grinned wryly in return. "And we'd better connect. They use silver for their cages, and the room I was kept in was lead lined, so mental communication might be limited. I still have the beacon under my skin, so you can ask Cristos for a portable locator for it. It wasn't any use last time, but you never know." Dev closed his eyes and concentrated, allowing all of them access to his mind. At once, he felt his companions enter him, take his print and leave their own. They were linked, enough to contact at a deeper level than their kind usually allowed. It was necessary. If the new hideout was as well shielded as the last one, they needed to be close and deep. He opened his eyes and saw the others blinking in reaction. "Now whoever they take we'll be ready. I'll walk out to my car now. It'll be thought unusual for me to leave before the end of a sale, but I'll tell them I have family problems that need attending to. They won't ask. I'm secretive about my family."

"Not without reason," Constant purred.

Dev lifted an eyebrow. "You don't do the same thing?"

Constant shrugged.

Dev left the room, went to a small room close to his own, where sounds of celebration were still loud, and changed his suit to something more comfortable, dark slacks and a t-shirt, with a leather jacket on top. After excusing himself, assuring his colleagues that his family problem was probably nothing, but needed his presence, he

headed out. Warmed by the reminder of his triumph with the Rubens, he crossed the car lot.

He'd left his car in a dark corner of Triscombe's car lot, giving the PHR every chance. He wasn't to be disappointed.

As he bent to pull open the door, he felt a sharp pain at the side of his head. His last thoughts as he went under were; *damn, I hope they didn't use an opiate!*

Chapter Twelve

When Dev woke up, he was in a silver cage. Again. His pockets had been emptied, but since he'd deliberately only carried the bare minimum of items against this eventuality, fifty dollars and some change, his car keys and a few receipts, he wasn't surprised. Unfortunately, his spectacles were gone as well. He closed his eyes and rested. No opiate, just a dull throb at the back of his head and a heavy headache. If it was dark, he could have shifted and got rid of the headache, but lights shone dazzlingly into the cage and he'd bet any amount there were cameras trained on him, ready to film his every move.

But they already knew what he was, right? Maybe, maybe not. Maybe these cameras were connected to a network. Maybe the last set weren't. He had no way of knowing. Yet. That went as a priority on his 'Things To Find Out list', right behind the one word entry 'Alix.'

How had the PHR managed to find her? Was there a traitor in Department Fifty-Seven? It wasn't beyond possibility. Talents were as different in personality as any other people, and he'd met dragons he'd felt would have been better as weasels.

So who knew where Alix and he were staying? Who would be able to tell them? Cristos and his PA, Diane, of course, but if Diane turned out to be the traitor, he'd be deeply shocked. She was human, not Talented, but devoted to her job, her work and her boss. The rest of the team assigned to this job? Dev had enough trust in Cristos to know he wouldn't have made his choice lightly. Dev knew Laurie personally, had known him for years. The model he'd met socially, but he hadn't even been aware she was a Talent until the day before. The only ones he didn't know at all were the vampire, Andreas Constant, and the Frenchman, Fabrice. He doubted either of them would betray him. Cristos probably chose people with personal grudges against the PHR. No, it would be madness to doubt them, at least until he got himself and Alix out of danger. If they were traitors, then it was too late now, and if they weren't, they were his best hope of getting out of here free, clear and clean. Without leaving too much information for the bastards to gloat over. The less they knew about his kind, the better, and the more they believed the urban legends about shifters, better still. The silver they made their cages out of must have cost them a fortune. Silver affected some shifters, much as opiates did him, but Dev wasn't subject to that particular weakness. Thank God.

Briefly, he spread his senses, trying to contact the others, and felt a weak pulse in response. No words, just an awareness. At least one of the team was close by, and able to communicate through the barriers the PHR had set up.

He opened his eyes, squinting against the brightness of the lights. He didn't have to wait long.

"You're awake."

"Evidently." He kept his voice low, hoping to lure the man closer to him.

"You're a shapeshifter." It was Clay Lancaster.

"Where's Alix? What have you done with her?"

"She's safe." Did he detect a note of uncertainty in Clay's voice? Something he could use, perhaps. Or did Clay not know, had they taken her somewhere else? Oh God no, let her be somewhere near!

"Where is she safe?"

"Back where she belongs. With us, away from you. What did you do to her, you

bastard?"

Loved her. Showed her what she was capable of being, of doing. "Why? Is she hurt?"

"Not by us. But she cried for you. We-I-need to know what you've done to her. She's upset, she won't tell us a thing."

Good girl! Dev stretched his mind, exerted all his resources to find her. He knew her as he knew nobody else. If she was here, he should be able to find her.

Nothing. She was either far away or unconscious—or dead.

No, not that. Apart from the incredible pain even the thought gave him, Clay was talking about her in the present tense. Until he knew for sure, Dev wouldn't even go there. "What did you want to know? Perhaps I can help you."

"Did you do her? Have her? Sleep with her?"

"You know—" he broke off. Clay knew they'd made love at least once, that first time in his apartment. That meant he was asking the question for someone else's benefit. "We didn't," he finished.

Did he imagine the soft sigh? No, he heard it all right. Relief. Could Clay be on their side? No, he wouldn't go that far, but he loved his sister. He wouldn't want to hurt her. That meant they wouldn't take lightly the revelation that Alix had made love with a shifter. A surge of anger nearly made him lose control, surprising him with its intensity. He'd lived with the knowledge that some people hated and feared his race. Why did it affect him so much now?

Because Alix had been one of those people. She had been brought up to despise his kind. He'd found his Juliet, only to be forced to deal with Capulets.

"Did you brainwash her?"

"How would I do that?"

Any trace of softness left Clay's voice when the subject turned away from his sister. So his compassion didn't extend to Dev. "You creatures have mind power."

"Just a little telepathy." He had no compunction in lying. It was part of his life; lying to protect the community. Perhaps he could spread a few legends himself, while he was about it. "We're not as powerful as you might think."

"Don't give me that. You can control. Take over someone's mind."

An inner shudder shook Dev. Compulsion. Yes, he could do it, but it was forbidden in every community. It was a denial of basic human free will, and anyone caught using it was subject to the death penalty. No appeals, no excuses. It didn't stop the rogues and renegades, but it helped to make it less likely. Persuasion, now, that was another matter. He couldn't force Clay to do something that was against his will, but he might find a way in. The only way he knew was Alix. "I wouldn't do that to anyone, even if I could. I wanted to take Alix away, give her a chance for a new life. Don't you want that?"

The slight hesitation told Dev he had hit a nerve. "She needs to be with her people." Clay's statement was flat, unemotional, and Dev rejoiced.

"She wants to be on her own, to start afresh. She doesn't want your community, and she doesn't want mine." True enough. His community wouldn't force anything on Alix that she didn't want. Even some vampires chose to live by day and ignore their powers as much as they could, and vampires were usually extremely proud of their heritage and their abilities. But they had the choice.

Another pause. "Alix is back where she belongs."

"Where is that?"

A pause. "With the community."

"Is she hurt?"

Another pause. "No."

Then, shocking him, a voice in his head. *You have to tell me something useful. Or they will kill her.* At the front of his mind, the shallowest level, but it was Clay.

Why?

She is tainted by being with you. Tell me you've slept with her and she dies at once.

Where is she?

Safe. Dev doubted that.

An ally! Dev's heart soared. Alix was alive, and he had an ally in the PHR. Now he knew how they had found Alix. Clay had taken them to her. He'd be able to trace her telepathically. *Why did you lead them to her?*

I wanted to find you and kill you. I tried to warn her, but she refused to listen to me.

Does she know you can communicate this way?

No.

Clay sighed, as though exhausted. It was exhausting. Perhaps he hadn't been aware of this Talent until recently. It took time to get used to using it. He sent a warning message to his team. *Go deeper.* They would have to communicate at a deeper mental level if they didn't want to be overheard or intercepted.

Clay Lancaster was either naïve or a fool. What did he think the PHR would do to Alix? Welcome her back into their happy little family? God save him from fools like these!

He tried to explore Clay, now he'd entered the forefront of his mind, but his attempts bounced off Clay's strong mental barrier like a tennis ball. If he'd been able to do that, he would have found the jewel and they could have finished this. As it was, his priority had to be to find Alix and get her out of here.

He tried once more. *Is Alix here?*

Yes. Somewhere.

"I've come for Alix," he said aloud. "Give her to me and I'll go away and leave you alone."

Clay laughed derisively. "You and whose army?"

He was tempted, but he said nothing. This questioning had to go two ways. *Where are we?*

No reply. So the private conversation was over. It might have been a test, to see what abilities he had, but he hadn't betrayed anything else, apart from a relatively mild telepathy. He'd felt Clay probe his mind, but Clay wouldn't have any more success than Dev had with him.

Dev was too used to protecting his inner mental tendencies, even against strong telepaths, to lose to this pathetic effort. However, he had to remain on alert. It wasn't beyond possibility that there was a stronger Talent here, one that might hope to slip in under the wire. It was a technique they were used to using in Department Fifty-Seven, a very successful one. A shame the others couldn't get closer to him, but the lead this cell was sheathed in prevented that. If he let one of them in, they could operate from there. Two against one might just do it.

"Why do you hate us so much?" A general question, but perhaps it would give him an opening.

"You are deviants, mistakes. You have no place in our world and too much power to be allowed to exist."

"Alix told me werewolves killed your parents. Did you ever catch them?"

Pain, sharp and intense, pierced him, but didn't hurt, because it wasn't his pain. On the nail. He'd dropped the question in to see what effect it had. Now he knew.

"No. My parents left the community, wanted to make a different life, but the deviants wouldn't let us. They killed Mom and Dad. I heard them crying for mercy, I heard the howls." Clay's voice cracked and he cleared his throat noisily. Dev didn't need telepathy to know the man was near to tears. "We had to go back to protect ourselves. Your people had made it clear what would happen. You couldn't leave us alone, could you?"

Dev hadn't realized the Lancasters had left the PHR. Alix seemed to think they were still part of the organization, but she'd been very young when her parents had been killed, and not present at the scene. "Don't label us all the same, Lancaster. We're not all good, we're not all evil."

"How many of you are there?"

"How do I know?" He wasn't sure. They just existed. It was hardly as if every person in the world knew everyone else. "What do you mean, us?"

"We know about weres and vampires. Are there any more?"

"Any more what?"

"Deviants."

"I don't know any deviants."

Clay made an exasperated sound. "You're all deviant! There are people working on a cure for you, but they haven't found one yet. Until then, the only choice we have is to destroy you."

A threat or a warning? "How will you do that?"

"The usual way. A gun usually proves efficient."

"Why do you hate us so much?" This was the question that had puzzled Dev ever since he'd learned of the existence of organizations created purely to kill his people. As a little boy, he'd asked his parents, and they couldn't answer any more than he could now.

"You're evil. You're too powerful, too dangerous. You have to be controlled, or cured, for the good of mankind."

A parroted response. Dev was no nearer understanding. He couldn't see but heard Clay's chair scrape back as he got to his feet. A shuffle of feet heralded the presence of someone else in the cell. Perhaps he'd have better luck with this one.

Another man, one he didn't know and Clay never addressed by name came and asked questions. Slowly, steadily, eliciting information. The conversation must be recorded. Dev imagined them presenting the edited version of the Monster they had captured, and he smiled wryly to himself. He answered the questions, careful what he said, padding his answers with queries and assumptions they could deny or accept.

At the end of two hours or thereabouts, he felt wrung out. Now could be the danger time. And so it proved to be. Another questioner replaced this one, and the lights drilled into his skull, his headache worsened by the lights and the questions.

In the switch between questioners, a message came through.

Dev? Can you hear me?

He breathed a careful sigh of relief into the darkness. *Loud and clear, Laurie. Where have you been?*

Finding a breach. The whole bloody building seems to be lead encased, but we've found a split in the casing. Are you ready for us to come in? We're in position, just say the word.

Dev considered the situation. *No. I don't know where Alix is. She's not in here with me, and I want to be absolutely sure she's safe.*

You okay, Dev? Good to go? Not hampered in any way?

I'm fine. Try to find out where Alix is and let me know. As soon as they found Alix, he was out of there. His abilities were intact.

Sure thing. Hang on in there.

When the new questioner arrived, it was a woman. Her first question was rapped out, intended to take him by surprise.

"Did you fuck Alix Lancaster?"

His answer was immediate and direct. He didn't have to think about that question.

"No." He'd made love to her.

"You're lying."

"No I'm not."

"Are you saying you don't lie?"

"No."

He gave back answers as fast as the questions he got, and he knew eventually she would throw in something he wouldn't want to answer. It came about ten minutes into her questioning session.

"Name another shapeshifter."

"No." A lifetime's upbringing saved him from disaster. He was bored and tired. Knowing he'd need his wits about him, deciding he'd learned all he could, he shifted his eyes. Now he had the third eyelid wyverns were gifted with and he could block out the lights.

Dev Wyvern took a power nap.

In another anonymous bedroom, a guard outside her door, Alix knew she could escape, knew Clay was giving her the chance to escape. She had mental strength, she could overcome the single guard, and no one stood outside her window, only one floor from the ground.

On the other hand, the ease of escape might be a trap. There had to be hidden guards outside as well. They might want the excuse to kill her and without any weapons, with no friends nearby, they could get away with it.

Her head still ached from the drug; her mind felt like it was stuffed with cotton wool. An opiate. Remembering what Dev had told her she hoped they hadn't fed them to him, too.

The doorknob rattled before it opened so she knew it was Clay before he came in. He'd always done that, rattled the doorknob instead of knocking. He stood in the room and closed the door quietly behind him, but didn't cross the floor to approach her.

She forced a smile. *"Afraid of me?"*

"Afraid of what you've done. You slept with him, didn't you?"

More tricks? There was one way of finding out. Stretching out her senses, senses that, thanks to Dev, she wasn't ignoring any more, she searched for a disturbance and found none. This room wasn't bugged. *"Is this room bugged, Clay?"*

"No." At least he told her one truth. He took a couple of steps forward and lowered his voice. *"They want to kill you, but I said there was no need. Your lover denied sleeping with you."*

"Then let me go."

"You know I can't do that." Just for a moment, his face twisted in agony. This big, strong man, the man she'd relied on for so long, didn't know what to do. It sent her heart racing faster, panicked.

"What do they plan to do?"

"If you're pure, if you're untouched, then they'll take you to a community to be re-educated. You forgot the lessons, Alix."

In the end, it was she who took the steps to him, she who put her arms around him, cradling his big body close. "Did you lead them to me? You did, didn't you?"

He nodded. "I'm sorry," he whispered, so low she had to strain to hear him. "I didn't mean to. I wanted to make sure you were all right, that's all. Steve came with me. Then we found out they were holding you prisoner, and we had to break you out in case they were hurting you. You know that, don't you?"

"You're Talented." It was a statement. How could he have hidden it from her for so long? She'd been terrified of her Talents, convinced she was the only one, alone in the world. To find that Clay had gifts, too, and had hidden them from her, was too much for her to bear.

"I was so scared." He swallowed, and put his arms around her, holding her carefully, tenderly. Alix wasn't sure any more who was comforting whom. "The PHR said they could help me and you to deny them. They said they were evil, gifts of the devil. You don't remember much about all that. You were just a baby when the Lancasters adopted us."

Shock reverberated through her. Alix forced herself to keep her words steady. "Adopted? We're adopted?"

He nodded again, his voice low, filled with emotion. "I was only seven and you were a baby. It's no wonder you don't remember anything. They tried to remove the gifts I had-surgically."

"Clay, no!" Her skin prickled with horror. Why hadn't he told her any of this before?

"Yes. It hurt so bad I didn't want them to do it to you. I pretended their operation had worked, and they believed me. I knew it was wrong to have these feelings, these mental-things, but I thought there was a better way of coping. So I never told them about you, and I tried to help you to get over it another way." He drew back a little, watching her with pain-filled eyes. "But you never did, did you?"

She shook her head no. "I'm glad I didn't. People are just different, Clay. Not scary, not evil, just different."

"It's evil, evil to change people, influence people in that way."

She took an intuitive leap. "What did you do that scared you so much?"

His pause was so long she thought he wasn't going to answer her, but eventually he murmured, his mouth close to her ear; "I killed someone once."

"What?"

He pulled her close, stroked her, wouldn't let her look at his face, so she could see how much his story affected him. "Our grandmother-the Hungarian one-looked after us, but when she died we were left with nothing. Our birth parents had died a few years before in a car crash. I never knew them, don't remember them, but I remember our grandmother. We lived in New York then. It was nearly Christmas. I didn't know what to do, could hardly speak English and when somebody tried to take us, I-killed him. With a thought. It was a bum, someone who definitely wanted to hurt us, but he didn't deserve to die. The Lancasters saw me do it, and they talked to me, promised me they could make it go away. They didn't, but I found other ways of controlling it."

Alix stood passively in his arms, letting him talk, hearing his voice wash over her in

waves of pain, not sure if the pain was his or hers, or if it mattered because they both felt the pain now.

"They took us in, looked after us, loved us. And I let them think the operation had done its work, but it didn't. It just gave me crippling headaches." Headaches he still suffered from, Alix realized. Not very often, but she'd accepted his explanation of migraines.

They never told her of her heritage, never told her she was adopted. "How can you say they loved us?"

"They did. They did what they thought was right. And who's to say they weren't?"

Alix closed her eyes. "They weren't right. You can't change what people are, what's in their nature. It's wrong."

"And your boyfriend, the man downstairs? What about him?"

"I love him, Clay." With a shock she realized she'd let her heart speak before her head. She did love him, it was true. With such a deep, personal truth, she couldn't lie in the next sentence. The truth stunned her. "Whatever he is, I love him."

"Oh no, oh, Alix!" Clay groaned, holding her so tightly she could hardly breathe. "Come back to us, please, come back!"

They stood locked together for an age, in which Alix took the opportunity to clear her head of the last vestiges of the drug they'd quietened her with, and to recall and think. "Clay, there is no 'us.' it's an illusion." She pulled back, looking up at his tear ravaged face. "Our parents were members of the PHR, but we don't have to be. I left." She took a chance. "I met a relative, Clay. He must be a distant relative, but he looks so much like me that we must be related. He will help us control our gifts, use them properly."

"It's a sin," Clay whispered, but something, a spark of hope perhaps, warmed his previously bleak eyes.

"So we have to control them, don't we? He said he'd help me. He'll help you too."

"What's his name?"

"Vencel. Vencel Takács."

Immediately he drew back, pushed on her shoulders until she staggered a few steps back and the back of her knees hit the bed. She had to put her hand down to right herself.

"I've heard of him. He's recruiting people. He has a hideaway, but we've never been able to find it. Will you help us? Alix these people are evil. They want to take us over, make us slaves and they're banding together to do it. We have to defend ourselves. Oh, the PHR isn't perfect, but at least they're human!"

All his fears returned. Alix saw his face, saw the horror etched on his beloved features and knew she would need help if she was ever to rescue Clay and draw him back to humanity. "Everybody's human. It's not wrong to be different, Clay!"

"Perhaps it is." He turned and walked to the door.

"Clay, I just want to know one thing. Did you help to kill the Murdochs?"

He turned back to her, frowning, one hand on the doorknob. "Who?"

"You showed me the pictures. The dragons. Their name was Murdoch."

He left the door and walked towards her, deep interest replacing the hatred in his eyes. "Dragons? Is that what they were? Those creatures Steve killed?"

She fumbled to regain her slip. "That's what they looked like to me."

"Is that what your boyfriend is? A dragon?"

At least she could answer that truthfully. "No."

"What is he, then?"

She shook her head, wishing she could back away even more. "He's a man, Clay." Hate suffused her brother's face, and she tasted his fear, souring his nature. "Just as I'm a woman."

"I can't help you." This time he strode to the door, only pausing before he opened it and flung it wide. "I can't help you, Alix, but perhaps they can." He glanced at the two people standing outside the door. "She's all yours."

Chapter Thirteen

"You wanted her? Here she is!"

The cage's door grated open, the silver flashing in the bright light. Dev opened his eyes.

Something was shoved into the darkness at the edge of the cage. Something dark, something that thudded with the softness of flesh and smelled slightly of burning.

Swallowing back his apprehension, Dev walked to the heap and squatted next to it. Jumbled clothing, streaked with something wet.

Blood.

Dev reached out, noting with strange detachment that his hand was shaking. Grasping the bundle, he turned it towards him.

His mind froze.

Alix, eyes closed and pale, so pale. He pressed his hand to her forehead and felt her iciness. A hand, just as icy, seemed to grip his heart, clutch it so hard he could barely breathe. She was so beautiful, even covered in blood. Please God, let it be someone else's blood!

It wasn't. Dev lifted her shoulders, pulling her on to his lap, and saw the raw marks on her wrists and just under her shoulders, where she must have twisted to try to escape. Her ankles, protruding from jeans roughly cut off below the knee, were similarly marked. The skin was singed black from burns.

Apart from that, there wasn't a mark on her. Under his hand, pressed to her heart there was a single thud. Then, what seemed like a lifetime later, another, then a flutter. "What have you done to her?"

He spoke quietly into the darkness beyond the cage, holding in everything, waiting to hear what they had done.

"She was tainted. She'd associated with your kind, she had no defense. You killed her, Deverell Wyvern, just as surely as if you'd attached the electrodes yourself."

Electrodes! "You electrocuted her?"

"We've found ECT useful in the past. It took a high voltage to subdue her." The voice was flat, emotionless.

"You've killed her." The stupidity, the callousness, the cruelty of the act staggered him. How could they think that his race was a threat?

"She's dying. We brought her to you to die, since you seem so fond of her."

No longer concerned about anything but this, anything but the cold body of the woman he loved, Dev opened his mind, using its full force to broadcast to whoever was listening.

Move in. Move in now!

He heard a thump from the upstairs room and Constant's voice in his head. Where are you?

Don't bother. I'll come to you. Capture anyone you can, or kill them if you like. I don't care.

He heard the pause as his team assimilated what he'd just said, then a howl from the room above.

He kicked out at the bars of the cage, shifting as he did so, ignoring the sound of ripping material as his clothing disintegrated under the pressure of the larger form of the wyvern. Changing back as soon as the cage gaped open for him, he scooped Alix tenderly in his arms and headed up the stairs.

Whoever had brought her wasn't in this dank cellar any more. He hoped they'd caught the bastard. Then he could see what it felt like to have several thousand volts shot through his body.

At the top of the stairs, it took him a few seconds to kick open the door and then daylight met him.

"Dev! Oh shit!"

Naked, tears streaming down his face, all Dev could do was stare at Alix.

Someone put a gentle hand on her wrist, feeling for a pulse. "I can't feel anything, Dev. She's dead."

"Nooooo!!!" She couldn't be, she mustn't be. If she was dead, he might as well be dead himself. After he'd hunted down her killers. "The world isn't large enough to hide them. I'll destroy them, take them out myself. Every single one of that fucking organization." His words were soft, but it was a promise, an oath.

"Wait." Laurie, hair bound back tightly and covered with a dark cap, dressed in black polo necked shirt and jeans. A far cry from the fashionable soccer player, but still Laurie, still his friend. He gripped Dev's chin, forcing him to look him in the eyes. When he met Dev's anguish, he winced, but held steady. "Dev, there's a chance. How long has she been gone?"

"Minutes. Seconds. I don't know, but not long."

"Convert her. It's her only chance. Think, man!"

The growled words did more than anything else to get his stunned mind working again. It might work. In his other form, all hurts were healed. The conversion itself took about fifteen minutes, then the both of them would need to rest. He might be in time.

Pressing Alix's soft body close to his, he looked dazedly around the room. "Take one of the bedrooms upstairs," snapped Svetlana. "We'll take care of things down here. You'll be safe, Dev."

Needing no other encouragement, Dev took the stairs two at a time and burst through the nearest door. A double bed. That was all he needed. He laid Alix carefully on the bed, never taking his eyes off her.

Then he shifted, careful to keep his form no larger than man sized. Laurie entered and closed the door behind him. This ceremony, while short and ritual free, was still private and Laurie was his chosen substitute for Alix. Laurie laid his hand on Alix's briefly, then turned to Dev. "This is for Alix Lancaster, Deverell Wyvern's chosen one," he murmured, then brushed Dev's chest. Dev felt a twinge of pain as Laurie wrenched a scale free. He held it while he watched Dev shift back to human form, his bright eyes dulled with grief for his friend. He held out his hand, palm up, and Dev took the scale with a murmur of thanks. It was done. The chosen one, or the substitute, had to select a scale or feather or hair from the breast of the converter.

"Do you want me to stay?"

"No. But stay close. I'll be exhausted when we're done, whatever the outcome."

Hold it together, hold it together.

Laurie grasped his shoulder and left the room, the gesture of friendship brief but deeply felt.

Dev couldn't do anything in return, but stepped to the bed and lay down next to Alix. No time to lose. Taking her hand, he pressed the scale into it and felt it begin to warm. He breathed out in relief. There had to be a spark of life left in her, or that wouldn't have happened. Extending a claw, he ripped her jeans from waist to knee, exposing one beautiful leg.

"My love, please forgive me. This should be done with your permission, but I have no choice."

He pressed the scale to her upper thigh, pressed her hand on top and put his hand on top of hers in the required manner.

That was all he could do. All that was left was to pray.

Despair filled Dev's heart when nothing happened. Then he felt the heat through their combined hands. The heat increased, burned, but it would have taken far more than that for him to move his hand off hers. He'd cut it off before he'd take it away. If she'd been conscious the pain would have been intense, searing through her body, but she'd already had that. The pain.

"Sweetheart, come back to me, please. Then you can choose what you want to do. Just come back."

He waited, held his hand firmly over hers and waited. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done. Only the heat, stinging his hand, kept him alive, kept him hoping.

He waited. He remembered, he thought. His feelings for Alix reminded him of his first wife, whether he wanted it to or not. He loved Annie, he'd devoted his life to her, he'd even tried to age but he hadn't fooled her. She was part of him and while he was alive, she would live in him. When she'd died he'd sworn he wouldn't do that again, fall for a woman who couldn't share his life completely. They hadn't had enough time.

His second marriage had been a disaster. If he hadn't been so keen to avoid falling for another mortal, he wouldn't have rushed into a relationship with someone totally incompatible in every way but one.

Now he'd found a new love. How could two such different women evoke the same emotion in him? The same, but different?

With Alix, he wanted her, wanted to be naked with her, making love or holding her in the aftermath. It was an urge that went beyond his carefully controlled mind, his regulated emotions. She'd struck right through to the man inside, from the very first moment.

If she died, he would die, too.

She didn't move, but her chest moved in a convulsive breath and he felt like dropping to his knees and thanking his guardian angel. He couldn't, he had to maintain the contact.

The pain helped him. A good pain, a burning tingle he felt through his whole body, keeping him alert, keeping him awake.

Even if she lived, Alix might not want to continue with him. He was giving her power and longevity, completely and without ties. She could do what she wanted, as long as she lived.

After she was well, then he'd see what came next. It was enough that she lived.

He waited, something he wasn't good at, forced himself to keep still. Eventually the pain in his hand faded, died. That meant he could take his hand away.

Hers fell to the sheets and underneath lay the mark, a perfect Wyvern traced in black on her upper thigh.

Just like his.

Chapter Fourteen

Alix opened her eyes. She lay on a bed in a room she didn't know, but this was no hotel room. The vanity was cluttered, and a few photographs in frames stood on its surface. When she turned her head, she saw a bedside table containing a digital alarm clock and several other things, a tissue box, a glasses case, a book. Sixteen hundred hours, the clock read. The heavy dark red drapes were closed, so she had no idea where she was. She was alone.

Lying quietly, Alix searched her memory for answers. She remembered her brother leaving the room, and after that a blank. A burning pain. Then some scattered memories, of being told to drink, being told to sleep.

That was all. She didn't know where she was or how she got here. Had the PHR taken her somewhere else? At least she was alive, though she felt very weak. They'd probably drugged her again.

Forcing herself to move Alix propped herself up on one elbow and flung the sheets back. She was naked. Who had undressed her? As she turned to swing her legs off the bed and on to the lushly carpeted floor, she caught sight of something on her leg

She twisted to examine it. A tattoo, just like Dev's, a dragon-wyvern-with its wings outstretched in the same pose as the one on the pendant. How the hell had that happened, who had done it, why hadn't she woken, how long had she been out?

She had to get out of here, get some answers. Just as she got to her feet the door opened, but she couldn't see who had come in because her senses swam and she lost focus.

Strong arms lifted her and placed her back against the sheets, a soft murmur reached her ears.

Dev.

Thankfully, she leaned against his shoulder while he stacked pillows behind her back to support her, then he gently pushed her against them and drew the covers over her once more, tucking them up to her armpits, covering her breasts.

Her dizziness cleared and she saw him clearly. It was Dev, dressed in soft jeans and an open shirt, not a product of her wishful thinking. He was really here. Wherever that was.

He gazed at her, and she saw desperate worry in his eyes, together with something else, apprehension perhaps. When she reached out, he took her hands in his and sat on the bed facing her. "How do you feel?"

"Weak. Please, Dev, tell me—"

He hushed her. "Peace, love, I'll tell you it all. What do you remember?"

She bit her lip. "My last clear memory is Clay turning away and telling someone I was all theirs. After that, very little."

"We'll start there then. You're safe now, Alix, in the apartment Laurie rents in New York." She frowned and he smiled. "Laurie's a friend of mine. He helped get you out of that farmhouse. Remember the meeting at Department Fifty-Seven?" She nodded, recalling the blond soccer player. "Okay, you remember Clay. I thought they were coming for me at the auction house, do you remember that part?" She nodded again. "They took you. I don't know how they found you but Cristos is making enquiries to find out."

"No need." She pressed his hands, wanting to feel his comforting warmth. "Clay is Talented. He traced me by tuning into my mind."

Dev paled. "Jesus." He stood up and pulled a cell phone from his pocket, punching in a number. He didn't wait long for an answer. "Hi, yes, it's me. Alix has woken up. Yeah, she's weak but she seems fine. Listen, Cristos, she says her brother is Talented. He tracked her mentally. Yeah. Okay, that sounds fine, but send someone who can intercept, okay? A Sorcerer. Fabrice would be fine, thanks. I'll be in touch."

He cut the call and shoved the phone back in his pocket. "Your brother can track us down. They're sending Fabrice over to block any attempt to reach you. He's a Sorcerer, so he should be able to do it with little trouble." He sat down again and reached for her hands, as though he needed physical contact. "Where were we? Oh yes, the house."

Without warning tears filled his eyes and one spilled over. Alix watched the single tear track down his cheek, over the stubble of a day old beard. Dev had never been less than immaculately groomed when she'd seen him before. What had happened to make him break his habit?

"Dev, what is it?"

He shook his head, frowning, and blinked the tears away. "You might not like the next bit. In fact, I'm sure you won't, but I have to tell you. After that, it's your choice, but remember that I love you. Please. I did everything for you."

Alix's breath came shallowly and she had to force herself to breathe. For a moment, she'd thought that Dev had killed her brother, but then she recalled the phone call. No, Clay was still alive, and at large. "What have you done?"

He blinked and looked away, unable to meet her eyes. "I converted you."

She wasn't sure what he meant, didn't want to think of it.

"Let me tell you what happened. They did something to you. Electrocuted you, in an attempt to drive out the demons I suppose. And your brother let them." She heard the click as he gritted his teeth. "Clay Lancaster's a dead man, if I get my hands on him. They brought you to me, they had me in a silver cage downstairs. They pushed you in so I could see you. I called the troops in then, and they broke in while I broke out. We got one. One! The rest escaped and they took the pendant with them. We were too intent on getting you safe. They got away while we were busy with you, so you were their distraction." He swallowed, and hung his head, his attention on their linked hands. "You died in my arms, sweetheart. I never, never want anything like that to happen again." He paused, biting his lip, not even trying to hide his distress. Alix's heart went out to him, but she forced herself to remain silent and listen to him. "I was ready to follow you, but Laurie reminded me there was one way to save you. So I took it."

He look up, meeting her gaze and the look of bleak desperation stunned her. "I converted you, love. You're a wyvern now, like me. You see, when we shift, we heal. So I converted you, then I entered your mind and helped you shift." The bleakness in his eyes warmed a little. "You're a very beautiful wyvern, Alix. I kept you in that form and we brought you here. I only shifted you back when I was sure you could survive. I don't know what you want to do, and I'm sorry I had to do this. I know you wanted to think about it, perhaps choose not to do it, but I've taken that choice out of your hands. Please forgive me. If you can't bear it, then you can still choose to take the only other course. I'll come with you. I won't let you go alone."

It took her dazed mind a moment or two to catch up with him. He'd converted her, but if she chose not to carry on, he would help her to die, and join her.

That was not acceptable. "No. I can't let you do that." She swallowed. So much to get used to, so fast! "I have to try." She couldn't rely on him, either. "How do I shift?"

His long outbreath showed her how much he'd dreaded her answer. "The full moon is on us. We'll be forced to change tomorrow. When a shifter is newly made, it's customary to wait for the moon, when the change happens whether you want it to or not. Your body knows what to do, and it will do it. All you have to do is take note and emulate it, when you want to shift. Does that sound like something you could cope with?"

"I don't know." She blinked. "But I'll try. I'm glad I'm still alive, though." She gasped and fell back against the pillows, a wave of fatigue washing over her. His murmur of concern made her open her eyes again. "Why am I so tired?"

"Because your body has changed. You're a different being, Alix. It needs time to cope. After tomorrow, I want you to rest."

"I would, but I can't."

He gripped her hands. "You can. I insist on it. You can go to Takàsc's where you'll be safe."

"No."

"Yes."

"Dev, I can't." Weak but still fighting, Alix sat up again. "Do you know how hard it was for me to turn my back on everything I was brought up to believe?" His eyes sparked, showing he understood, but he said nothing. "Well, I did it and I made it clear that Clay either came with me or stayed behind, but whatever he chose, I was doing it anyway. I was prepared to leave everyone I loved to make a new life for myself. After our parents died, the discussions sickened me. So werewolves, rabid dogs, or something killed them. But to talk about wiping out all of their kind, making a bloodbath wasn't going to bring my parents back, was it? I'd had enough." He watched her gravely. "Now I have to do what I can to stop the bloodshed. More than that, I want my brother away from all that. Isn't it dangerous for him to stay there, a man with his talents? When they discover what he can do, they'll kill him. Clay gave up a lot for me, Dev. I owe him this much."

"Won't you let me act as your deputy?"

"You can't. You don't know him, Dev."

Dev sighed. "No, I don't. We're meeting tomorrow morning. If you like, I can divert the meeting here with no loss of security, so you can attend. I don't want you traveling for at least another day or maybe two. Your system has to rest."

"Will you rest with me?"

She didn't imagine the flare of passion that blazed in his eyes before he quelled it. His grin was rueful. "I want you more than ever, Alix. But we have a lot to sort out before we get that far."

He released her hands and got to his feet. "First, you have to eat. Keep up your strength. Then sleep. If you eat what I bring you, I'll sleep with you." He grinned. "Deal?"

"Oh yes."

When she awoke in Dev's arms Alix knew she never wanted to spend another night apart from him. Whatever he'd done, however he'd done it, this was enough. He'd come to bed after preparing a meal for them both and gathered her closely, gently to rest on his body, refusing to make love to her although he'd been strongly aroused.

She slept deeply and dreamlessly, and as far as she knew she didn't leave the circle of his arms all night. Never had she felt so safe, so happy. When she awoke he was sleeping, his legs tangled with hers, his arms holding her as though he would never let her

go. Her arms wound around him, too, her head resting on his chest. She blinked awake, feeling her lashes brush his skin, then drew away a little so she wouldn't tickle him. Her head felt a little light, but the dizziness had gone and the desperate weariness that had affected her the day before.

A wyvern. She was a wyvern. She tried the thought again. A wyvern. Remembering the magnificent creature Dev had become she wondered how anyone could ever hate or fear them. Scratch that. Remembering the wicked claws Dev could unsheathe, a wyvern in a fury might not be the best thing to meet on a dark night.

That meant she had claws too. Cool thought. Alix lifted her hand away from Dev's vulnerable flesh and concentrated on extending a claw. Nothing. So she visualized it in her mind, as she'd seen it at the end of Dev's finger. Still nothing.

"What are you doing?" His sleepy voice was the first indication she had that he was awake.

"I was trying to make a claw."

His laugh, rich and deep, filled her with gentle pleasure. "Wait until later. When the moon rises tonight, you'll get more than a claw. Do you want to try it now?"

She bit her lip. "Is it advisable?"

He lifted her hand and kissed each fingertip, his lips warm and dry. "It would be better if you waited. At first you'll find a full transformation easier than a partial one. That requires more control. I'll help you with the size tonight, too. Your natural size will be much larger than this room can take, but I don't think it's a good idea for us to shape-shift in Central Park."

She joined in the laughter this time. "Some of the crazies who go there probably think the place is full of dragons already."

He cinched her tightly against his sleep warmed body and she felt his morning erection rise hard against her stomach. Immediately she responded, her body dampening in preparation for his, the moisture warm against her thighs.

"I can't say I'm entirely sorry this happened," he murmured. He lifted his knee, pushing it a little higher between her legs. "I wanted you to make the decision for yourself, but I wanted it to be this. But you still need a long period of training. Perhaps you should go to Takàsc's after all."

"Only if you come with me," she said, almost shyly, doubts filling her mind. He'd said he could find several women of his kind, and there was no such thing as one solitary soulmate. However much she wished it to be the truth. Fated mates sounded so much more-inevitable somehow. But she would treasure every moment she spent with him.

"I'd be delighted to come with you. Or I can take some leave from Triscombe's and take you somewhere nice and hot and isolated, where you can shape-shift as much as you like. And if you want to practice shape-shifting, it's better to stay naked." His voice lowered at the end of the sentence, rumbling in suggestive intimacy.

She rubbed her body against his, and lifted her face for his kiss. He took her mouth slowly, luxuriously, savoring her, before she felt his mind open to her.

It was different to the way it had felt before. She still had a line of communication open, she could still feel his rising passion, body and spirit but it was warmer, more intimate, closer, almost as if they had bonded and were truly one.

When he lifted his head she stared into his eyes, no secrets hidden from him and realized his mind was completely open to her. There was nowhere he wouldn't allow her to go, nothing he wouldn't allow her to know. "You do love me, don't you?"

His smile held no uncertainty. "I do. With everything I am."

She lifted her hand to cup his cheek, rough with morning stubble. "I love you too." What else could she say? He could see it for himself.

His smile turned hot and he bent to her lips again. She felt the wrench when he pulled away, gasping. "No more, love. Not yet."

She had other ideas. "I feel fine. Truly. What if I let you do all the work? Love me, Dev."

"Oh, I do," he breathed. "How can I resist when you put it like that?" He kissed her again, deep and soft and gentle. "Leave yourself open to me, *cariad*. Let me see when you're weary, so I'm sure I'm not tiring you."

She gave a single, jerky nod. "Yes. But I really want you, Dev. Prove to me I'm still alive, I'm still the same person I always was."

She let him feel her uncertainty, her fear. He moved to cover her, gently pushing her thighs apart so he could settle between them. "You're afraid of losing yourself?" She nodded again. "Don't be. You'll be your own wonderful self, always. If anything, you're enhanced. I can see the dragon in you, waiting to emerge and it will be beautiful. I'll be with you all day, all night, so you won't be alone when you consciously shift for the first time."

His sex prodded her clit and she saw his eyes darken when he read her reaction. Deliberately he moved again, gently stimulating, watching her. She lay back, let him see and feel the growing need to have him in her. She could hide nothing from him now, nor did she wish to.

A slow smile spread over his face, the lines bracketing the corners of his mouth deepening. She watched him, smiled back and gave him total control of their lovemaking.

"Good girl," he whispered, his breath hot on her lips, and he gave her the softest of angel kisses. "Let me do it all. Just enjoy."

"Do you like taking control?" she asked him, her wicked smile leaving him in no doubt of what she meant. His cock lengthened against her growing wetness, responding to their mutual heat.

"Sometimes."

"I'll buy you some silk scarves as a very special present."

He slid down her cleft, lifted up slightly and pushed. Just like that, he slid inside her and they both gave a long sigh of satisfaction. "Where would you get ideas like that, a sweet angel like you?"

"You're giving me ideas." Trust. Alix had never trusted anyone like that before but she would trust Dev with her life, and the idea of being tied up with silk scarves, totally in his control, made her sigh and lift her body towards him. Then the thought of her tying him in the same way made her groan.

"Oh yes. I think we can do that." He slid his hands under her bottom, drawing her closer, penetrating her deeper. "Gently *anywl*, let me do the work."

He stroked in and out of her, steady, powerful thrusts that had her straining against him, eager to take every inch. She realized he didn't just want to take care of her, it was more than anxiety that made him so careful, the restraint had a powerful effect on his libido. Coddling and caring for her, being able to show her how much she meant to him all sent him spiraling up into the clouds.

It was all she could do to let him, not to push so hard she tumbled him on his back. He gave her strength, love and trust in full measure, together with his body.

His glorious body. His hot, hard, passionate body.

"Oh yes, oh, Dev!" Alix held her breath and felt the sudden heat spiral into a single thread, pulling her taut, every muscle, every sinew. When he kissed her, forcing her mouth wide open, devouring her in their single shared orgasm Alix thought she might die.

But she didn't die. She wouldn't die for a long time. All she could hope was that they stayed together until the last hours they had, the last moments they saw.

Preferably doing this.

Alix woke up when he lifted her, carrying her to a large, luxurious, tastelessly expensive bathtub. It was pink marble, adorned with gold dolphin fittings, the water bubbling gently from the Jacuzzi whirring in its base. He climbed in with her, settling her between his legs, to rest against his chest.

When she giggled, he knew precisely why. "Amazing, isn't it? Laurie did a photo shoot in here and had it decorated to fit the photographers' expectations. The rest of the apartment is very stylish, but I think the footballer gene went a bit wild here."

"What's the footballer gene?"

He chuckled, drawing her up a little, letting the gloriously hot water swirl around their tired bodies. "Footballers are supposed to be vulgar and stupid. The fact that many of them are the opposite doesn't stop the press churning out the old clichés when they do stories, and some of them, like Laurie and his brother, are happy to oblige. It gives them a twisted kind of satisfaction to see the media lapping up every Rolex, every Ferrari. And it helps keep their private lives private." He paused, and she realized why when his soapy hands massaged her breasts. "Mmm, that feels good."

She chuckled. "I should be saying that."

His legs tightened around her. "Not from where I'm sitting. Your breasts are so beautiful, I could do this all day." He paused, teasing her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, then flattening his hands to soap her shoulders, rubbing and smoothing. "But we can't do it again until later. The team will be arriving soon. We have to dress."

"Do I have to borrow something from you?"

"No. Everything from the hotel was packed up and brought here. A shame really. You'd look so sexy in one of my shirts." He gently pushed her forward and rubbed her back. When she stretched a little and sighed he said, "You like that, don't you? I can feel your pleasure. I'll have to remember that."

If he did much more of this she'd turn and take him, rest or no rest, but he was right. Her bones ached, and she needed to rest. "Tell me about footballers. How famous are they?"

"Pop star famous." He paused and rubbed out a tension knot on her shoulder blade. She sighed and eased the muscle. "Film star famous. Wealthy and celebrated all over the world. Except here in the States of course. Which is why Laurie and his brother Josh like it here so much. They can go shopping and only be mildly mobbed, usually by Europeans or Latin Americans who recognize them. They can go to nightclubs without the paparazzi shoving cameras in their faces. They've both been selected to play for their country, so their fame is growing."

"Isn't that unusual?"

"Hmm? Not really. The Charltons, the Nevilles, there's a tradition of footballing brothers." He rinsed her, lifting the water in his hands to cascade over her back, heightening her sensitivity. "Laurie and Josh are both shifters, so they have tremendous

stamina and recovery power. They've learned to fake it pretty convincingly. Oh, they've been hurt, but when they shift they heal, much too fast for human recovery times."

He slid his arms around her waist and pulled her against him, to lie in the gently bubbling waters.

There was a lot to be said for a Jacuzzi in your home.

It was a close run thing, but they managed to get up and dressed without making love again. Alix felt better every hour, but she felt something stir inside her, something new, something she knew was the dragon. Dev never left her mind, his gentle presence becoming almost normal, soothing and watchful for any sign of the compulsion that would make them change their form.

However, it wouldn't happen until the moon rose, he told her, and that was a few hours away yet. Her apprehension clenched the muscles in her stomach, and she tried not to think about it.

When they went through to the large living room, the team were already there. Svetlana, Laurie, Andreas and Fabrice. Together with Cristos, who was the only person dressed formally, in suit and tie. The rest wore a collection of casual outfits, as did Deverell and Alix.

Alix was subjected to several hard stares, and a smiling one from Cristos. "Feeling better?"

"Much." She sat on the long sofa, and Dev sat next to her.

Cristos took the seat on Alix's other side. "You know Dev had no choice. It was convert you or watch you die."

She nodded. "It'll take some getting used to."

"Vencel Takàsc has gone home, but he's left a number for you to call. His offer still stands."

Alix nodded. "I haven't come to any decision yet, although I appreciate his offer very much. But I don't want to be apart from Dev."

All eyes went to Dev, who lifted a sardonic eyebrow and grinned. "What can I say? I'm irresistible, that's all."

"And the rest," his footballing friend murmured.

"I converted her, and she's accepted it. She's one of us now, whatever that means." Dev reached for her hand and folded it in his, giving her his warm comfort. Alix felt confused, bereft, but he was with her, as he'd promised, helping her to keep her thoughts private and on an even keel.

Cristos nodded, and turned his keen gaze to the others. Svetlana, sitting cross legged on the floor, tilted her head to one side and studied Alix openly, laughing when she returned the intent study. "Welcome to the community," she said dryly. Alix smiled, and something inside her relaxed. These people would not judge her, as she had been judged all her life, and find her wanting. They asked for nothing except secrecy, something it was in her own interest to agree to. She could be herself. Whatever that was.

Briefly, Cristos outlined the situation with the cell. "The farmhouse has been occupied, everything confiscated, as has the other safe house. The weight of all that silver should be a serious dent in their finances, and it also indicates some influential people are involved. Ideally, we'd trace them back to the source, but they know more than they should about us and they have to be shut down. Terminated." He paused, glancing around at the serious faces before him. Everyone understood the phrase. "We have the

authority to do what is necessary. The CIA know the situation, the FBI believe it to be a collection of oddballs who, nevertheless, pose a risk to the public at large. Both authorities know about the murder of the Murdochs. We are assured of their assistance, should we need it. We think they're sticking together, at least for now, which makes our task easier. All we have to do is find them."

"I know where they are," Alix said. "Or at least, I can find them."

Cristos swiveled to face her, denial in his fierce grey eyes. "You are extremely vulnerable. You and Dev are targets. You're out of this."

The finality in his tone didn't invite argument, but Alix argued anyway. No way was she going to sit back and let them 'terminate' her brother. Not without a fight. "So shouldn't we be standing up and waving our arms, shouting 'over here'? How else are you going to find them?"

This was her ace, the only card she had, if truth be told, and she had to play it now. "My brother, Clay Lancaster, is Talented. I know he's telepathic, and he might be a Sorcerer, like I am-was." The dead silence told her she'd stunned them. "I can find him and I'm probably the only person who can. There's no proof he was involved in the murders, and I can say in all truth that I don't know. He showed me photographs, but he's never said if he was directly involved. I don't think he was." She paused, and gripped Dev's hand. At least he was with her. She felt him, warmly in her mind, supporting her just by being here. "I know they have to be found, and I'll help you find him. I won't hold back, and I won't make bargains. I'll just ask that you try to take my brother alive, and listen to him."

Laurie broke the silence. "God. We can't kill one of our own. Not without listening to him first."

Cristos stared at her and sighed. "I was afraid of something like that. He's suppressed his Talents for so long it might be impossible to reach them, but you will be able to track him. Unfortunately, since he's communicated with no one else, you're the only one."

"He communicated with me," Dev said. "In the cell, when I was a prisoner. He linked with me and told me to lie about my involvement with Alix, or they would kill her."

"Guilt by association?" Fabrice gave a dry laugh. "Very nice."

"They went from an unpleasant nuisance to criminals when they committed murder," Cristos said. He sat perfectly still, leaning back so he could see everyone in the room. "But we will try to take them alive. We need to question them and find out what else they know about the PHR, what other crimes they've committed and how we can stop them spreading their poison. The organization has increased alarmingly in the last five years. As someone in possession of a Talent, I am disturbed. As a representative of a government organization, I consider their dangerous beliefs and habits could lead them to be perverted by an outside influence, and connections with other dissident terrorists. Either way, they have to be stopped."

"That's why we can't just send in the military to take them out." Andreas Constant, listening silently until then, made his thoughts heard. Sitting in a big leather armchair, one leg crossed over the other at the thigh, he gave the impression of danger without moving a muscle. Alix got the feeling he didn't need the military to back him up. He would gladly do the bloodiest work himself. "We need to question them. Well, if they resist the Sorcerers, they might come to prefer death. Okay, so what do we do?"

Cristos answered without hesitation. Had he known what Alix was about to say, or

had he just perfected his plan?

"We follow them as fast as we can, before they can think of splitting up. Or rather, you do. I'm staying here, but I'll be available to you at all times. Constant knows how to find me." He glanced at the vampire, then looked at the others. "I'm hoping they're hiding out in another rural area, but they could be anywhere. I have the addresses of the other members, but they've been checked and no one is home. The addresses have been secured in case they double back. I'll leave the details up to you, but I suggest you start soon. Those of you who want conventional weapons will be issued with them, if you have the requisite paperwork." He lifted an eyebrow. "I have a feeling you're all in possession of the right licenses, or you will be by morning." Meaning he would provide them if anyone needed them. Alix wasn't sure she wanted to know how he could do this. "Don't kill unless you have to, and if you do, I want a full report. If you kill psychically, put a bullet through the head afterwards. Bring as many in as you can and don't let any get away to spread the story." Cristos got to his feet and glanced down at her. "And take care of Alix."

A murmur of assent followed and Cristos left the apartment. The sound of the door softly closing broke the silence that had fallen.

"So," Andreas Constant said, looking straight at Alix. "Where are they? Or rather, where is your brother?"

"Give me a few minutes." Alix released Dev's hand and closed her eyes, concentrated on Clay. She felt Dev inside her, supporting her and waiting for the connection to be made.

She made the connection. Opening her eyes, she saw a room. A small sized living room, furnished with cheap furniture that didn't match. A long, tartan covered sofa. A teak veneered coffee table. And Clay sat on the sofa next to Steve. They had steaming coffee mugs in front of them and they were talking.

Alix listened, Dev with her.

"What do we do now?"

"We contact another cell and get the hell out of Dodge. The sooner we split up, the better." Steve sighed. "Pity about your sister, but it can't be helped. She was a sweet girl."

Clay's face twisted in pain. "I want her back."

"Too bad, man." Steve put his hand on Clay's shoulder and squeezed. "But we're in trouble. If those monsters come after us, we gotta be ready for them."

Someone else walked behind the sofa. The girl, Jonelle, from the cell. Three of them in the same place, at least. Jonelle leaned forward and handed each of them a gun, black, chunky and wicked. Alix hadn't the knowledge to tell what kind of gun, but Dev had. Old model Glock, nine millimeter. Strange that a Brit knew more than she did about firearms.

I had to learn. His voice was grim and she knew without being told why he had to learn. Jonelle's hand lingered on Clay's shoulder and he covered her hand with his briefly. That small gesture told Alix her brother was sleeping with the girl. She'd thought Jonelle was Steve's girl, but it seemed she'd switched her affections. It hadn't been a gesture of simple sympathy and her suspicion was confirmed when Jonelle slid her hand down Clay's chest, towards the waistband of his pants.

"I'll arrange for transport tomorrow," someone else said, just out of the range of Alix's vision. "Some of us can take rental cars, and the others buses and trains. We just need to know where the PHR wants us to go. They'll call us. They'll want to split us up."

Jonelle's grasp on Clay increased, her knuckles tightening. "We're together."

"Not if we're told otherwise," Clay said quietly. Alix found herself hating an

organization that would split up lovers. They'd done it before, she remembered. Couples had to be approved before they could even date in the community. They would split Clay and Jonelle in order to control them both.

She felt Dev recognize the weak spot at the same time she did and she hated it. Anything they could use, they had to take note of. Like it or not, Alix and her brother were on opposite sides now. One of them had to lose.

Where were they? Alix let her vision move around the room, as though she were standing in the middle and turning around three-hundred and sixty degrees. A phone in the corner, and a phone book. She moved towards the phone, keeping her concentration steady and even, her link with Clay firm but covert.

Green Mill, New York State.

As she recognized the words, a different presence probed at the edge of her mind and she turned to see Clay staring at her. "Alix?"

Before she could react, Dev seized her and dragged her out of there. She came to herself sitting on the sofa in Laurie's stylish apartment, in Dev's arms. He looked over her head to the others. "Green Mill, New York State."

"A small town near Arlington," Svetlana said. "I've been through it a couple of times. It won't be hard to locate them there."

"We need to travel separately and meet up at the same place," said Constant. "And if you want me in full possession of my powers, it'll have to be after sundown."

"Sounds as if they have to arrange transport," Dev commented. "That might take a day or so. We can't go tonight, or at least, Alix and I can't."

"Tell you what," Laurie chipped in, crossing one jeans clad leg over the other, "I'll go there tonight and keep an eye on them. You follow on tomorrow. I'll let you know if they move and we'll go from there."

"I'll go with you," Svetlana said, unfolding herself from the floor and getting to her feet. Alix was secretly pleased to see not all her moves were graceful. Away from the catwalk, she moved like an ordinary person.

Laurie looked pleased at her offer, his grin widening. "We'll drive down, then we'll have some transport. Hire a big car, an SUV or something, then we can carry some of the equipment."

"I'll be driving too," Constant said, "but I can't leave until the morning. I have arrangements for tonight. Let me know where you're staying and I'll find someplace else. We don't want to be in the same place. I'll go as a traveling salesman-you'd be surprised how convincing I can be."

"Would we?"

Constant smiled at Svetlana's tongue-in-cheek response, but a flicker of anger sparked in his dark eyes. "Oh yes, I think so. Before I leave, I'll go in to Department Fifty-Seven and collect some equipment. We do need to be armed, even if it's only as a cover."

It seemed they were all moving, and Alix knew why. Dusk was falling, and with the night came a stirring inside her, something she'd never felt before. Something that scared her. She stayed in Dev's arms, needing his comfort, his help, and he was there for her.

The others left, chatting companionably as they closed the door behind them.

Alix turned in his arms. "Dev?"

"Don't worry. I'm here. I'll be here as long as you want me." He unbuttoned the first button on her shirt. "We need to get undressed."

"Now?"

He chuckled, the vibration rumbling through her body. "If we shift when we're dressed, we'll destroy what we're wearing. Besides, I prefer you naked."

She couldn't quite believe that. Not yet, although she was more comfortable with her body than she'd ever been before. Dev had done that for her.

They stripped each other, she taking off his clothes, he taking off hers, and they soon stood naked in the middle of the floor. Dev pushed the furniture back, to give them more space, and she helped.

The twisting in the middle of her body increased all the time, and she fought to quell her fear. He reached for her, touched the skin just above her navel. "Look."

She looked down. A single dull, black scale lay on her skin, as though glued here. Except it wasn't. She hadn't felt the change, and as she watched, more scales clustered around the first one, and a fluttering feeling just under her skin, as if all the fine hairs were standing on end.

Dev took a pace back, watching her. "I'll regulate your size. You'll feel me with you all the time, but let nature take its course."

"Is it nature?"

He smiled, gently confident. "Yes. It's as natural as breathing. You'll see."

"Will it hurt?"

"Is it hurting now?"

She felt the tension in him and knew it was because he was forcing his change to hold off until she had completed hers. She had no way of controlling the sensations coursing through her body, ripples of awareness, nerve endings tingling as her new body blended with the old.

It didn't hurt. She watched the scales spreading across her skin, watched her arms lengthen and her legs shorten as she took on her new shape. Forcing down her panic, Alix stood as still as she could, felt her spine bend, forcing her body forward and felt a tingling behind. Her tail was growing.

Dev had done this to her, but it was this or death. And right now, she preferred this. When she blinked, a residual layer flicked up just after her eyelid.

That's your second eyelid. Turn and look at me.

She turned her head, aware her nose was leading the rest of her face. She could see it, stretching in front of her, black and scaly like the rest of her.

He'd shifted too. He stood before her, large hind feet firmly apart, supporting the lithe body, his tail curled around for balance. His arms were wings, folded against his sides. As she watched, he gently unfurled one to reach out and touch her, curl it over her back. She felt the warm, dry, feathery touch like a caress. *You're very beautiful.*

Like this?

Yes, like this. Do you want to see yourself?

I'm not sure. Such a change took some getting used to.

He growled low, the sound rattling the books on the shelves at one end of the room. *One day...* He didn't finish his sentence but she heard the unmistakable tones of desire. She hadn't thought of that.

She wasn't sure she was ready for that.

Move a little, he suggested. Wait. She felt his mind in hers, gently urging, and she took note of what he did, the way he reduced them both in size until they were about the height of a twelve year old, perhaps four and a half feet tall.

Now walk around. Get your balance, get used to being like this.

His red eyes gleamed as he watched her awkward shuffle. She thought he would

have laughed, had he been less tactful. Perhaps wyverns couldn't laugh.

I can always laugh, anywl.

Do I look funny?

You look adorable. The low growl at the end of the sentence left her in no doubt what he was thinking. Why should seeing her as a very small dragon turn him on?

I'm a very small dragon, too.

She turned to face him, careful to keep her tail balancing her as yet unwieldy body. *Are we flying tomorrow?* At the same time, the thought struck her. She could fly!

Not yet. A little at a time. Flying is tiring at first. You won't be able to go far until you get used to it. We'll drive over.

She tried a more elaborate move, spreading her wings and jumping, but she didn't take off.

Then he did laugh. She heard a rumble in his chest, and definite laughter in her head. *Very good, but I think you've had enough for tonight. Now change back.*

She lifted her hand to scratch her head, only realizing it was a wing and she'd probably lacerate herself with the sharp claws at the end of the finger bones just in time. *How do I do that?*

Try to remember how you shifted from your human form, then reverse it. Don't worry, I'll help, but I want you to be able to do this completely on your own by the end of tonight.

It was hard, much harder than she'd imagined and the first time she needed him to do it all for her. But he made her do it again, and again, until she was used to the feeling. He was a hard taskmaster, but he was right. If she could shift, and then shrink her form to the size of a mouse or even smaller, she could escape. If she could shift and expand to her largest size, she could fight back. Her scales were natural armor, so she could protect herself that way. He wanted her safe, but he wanted to be able to trust her to take care of herself, if she needed to.

Back in her human form, Alix was exhilarated at the realization that he trusted her to take care of herself. While she knew he would take care of her, he didn't want to smother her as Clay and her parents had done. He wouldn't dictate what she did and when she did it. She could stay with Dev and be her own person, the Alix she was just beginning to know.

At first, she tried to hide her joy, fearing he wouldn't understand, but she turned and he was waiting for her. She went to him, feeling his arms around her.

He nuzzled his mouth against her hair, pressed a gentle kiss against her forehead. "Welcome home."

Chapter Fifteen

Sitting outside the small house in a suburb of Green Mills, Alix felt almost dreamlike. This couldn't be real. The situation had caught up with her in the last day, and she couldn't quite believe it all. Creatures she hadn't believed in a week or two ago were standing close by. Bonded in more ways than she could have imagined with a man who, whatever he said, seemed like her soul mate. Whether he did or not she wasn't entirely sure. He was so much more experienced than she was that she still felt at sea. Questions she desperately wanted answered reverberated around her head, even at times like this, when she should be concentrating on something else. Would he be faithful to her? Did he want a relationship at all, or was this to help her into her new life? Did he really love her?

It would have to wait. She forced herself to concentrate. The forefront of her mind filled with the presence of others. It was ironic that Department Fifty-Seven was considered a development center for communications devices, since most of the people based there had no need of them at all. The technical wizard based there, Evan Howell, was working on devices to enhance weaker telepathic abilities, but nobody here needed it. Even newly converted Alix could hold the simple communication easily, and she suspected the others were lending her extra help. Not that it took them much more effort.

She sat in a van with the vampire, Andreas, who was designated the hub of the operation. Andreas held all the ends of the threads; he was the conduit for all communication and the overall controller.

The point of entry was easy. Dev would knock at the door. What they didn't realize was that Svetlana, in her firebird form and Laurie, as a griffin were coming in with him. In his pockets. He wore a loosely fitted leather jacket over his polo shirt and chinos, plenty of room for everyone. Underneath the polo shirt was a bulletproof vest.

Shape-shifters didn't seem to care who saw them naked. They'd stripped in the van, treating it as though they were going about their everyday lives, which they probably were. Nobody except Alix seemed at all affected by it. That was one aspect of her new life she'd never accustom herself to. At least Dev hadn't got naked, although she had no doubt that he would have done, if he'd had to, with no more concern than the other two showed.

Inside the house, Laurie and Svetlana were his backup and witnesses. Dev had also opened his mind to the other members of the team, so Fabrice and Andreas could see what he was seeing. As could Alix.

So she saw the shock on her brother's face when Steve told him who was at the door. She saw the weapon in Jonelle's hand, and the one in Clay's. She couldn't hear them properly for a moment, then she seemed to adjust, tune in. "What are you doing here?"

"I have a proposition." Dev's voice, low and quiet, seemed to come from somewhere within her. That was because she was part of him, sunk inside him. He stepped inside the room.

"Where's my sister?" Clay, face drawn with worry, glared at him.

"Safe."

"Well, what is it?" Jonelle, sharp and suspicious. As she should be.

Dev deliberately swung his gaze around the room, so they could all see. Windows, two doors, opposite each other, the one on the other side of the room presumably leading to the kitchen. A shabby, impersonal look. This was probably a house that never had permanent residents, always rented to transient visitors. It would house a family who

wanted to visit New York, didn't mind the short drive and wanted somewhere cheaper than what Manhattan could offer. Now it housed the remains of the PHR cell.

Dev's attention returned to Jonelle, Steve standing silently behind her. "We have your Ivan. You can have him back, if you like. For a consideration. We want the people who killed the Murdochs. They need to be brought to justice."

"Who are you? Who were those people who stormed the farmhouse? Do you have anyone else on your side? Did the Feds send you to get the killers?" The questions came rapidly from Jonelle.

Dev stared at her before he spoke and Alix felt heat. He moved a little so his right side was hidden, giving Laurie a chance to leap out of his pocket, so tiny he must have appeared like a small creature, a fly or a moth. "I'm Deverell Wyvern, and I'm an auctioneer. That's all you need to know for now. You're harboring murderers."

A sly smile crept over Steve's heavy features. "But we know you're more than that, don't we? You're a shapeshifter and you have friends. We want you and we want them. That's the deal. We're not letting you go now. Thanks for delivering yourself to us."

"What have you done to Ivan?" Janelle said, her face taut with the strain they were all trying to hide. "Is he dead?"

"Of course not." Alix felt Dev's forehead crease in a frown. A very strange feeling, a bit like moving a limb numbed by anesthetic. "We don't kill unless it's absolutely necessary." He swung around, confronting Clay directly, allowing Svetlana to leave the shelter of his pocket.

The two men stared at each other in silence for a moment before Clay demanded, "Did you save her?"

The others stared at him, astonished, and Steve put his hand on Clay's arm. Clay shook him off. "Did you?"

"I might have done." Clay's kept his mind firmly closed, although Dev tried to contact him.

"I want her safe, and I want her away from you. She's redeemable."

"Even if she isn't, she'd be useful." Jonelle's face held only speculation. No concern marked her features, the worry that Clay was showing. "I think he's lying, to get you on his side. I don't think she survived."

Clearly, Alix was less than nothing to her, just a problem to be taken care of. "We want to know what she told you about us, and where she is, if you did save her. And we want Ivan back. Then we'll let you go." She motioned with her pistol, and Dev obediently moved further into center of the room. "But they won't know if you're alive or dead, any more than we know about Alix. You're scum, you know. Worse than scum. Raping bastard."

Without warning, without having even raised her voice in anger, she shot Dev in the head.

Alix watched him fall to the ground as though it was slow motion, and knew Dev had blocked her. She watched him from another's eyes, probably Laurie, from the angle of the sight. Blood poured from his head and she wasn't aware of crying out.

A crash brought her back. Andreas burst through the back doors of the van, speeding across the road. Her temporary paralysis banished, Alix followed, racing across the road, heedless of any traffic that might be passing.

Andreas kicked in the door with one hard smash, and an echoing sound indicated Fabrice had done the same at the rear of the house. By the time they were in, Laurie and

Svetlana had grown. Still in their forms of firebird and griffin, they dominated the room.

Laurie swept out a massive, clawed paw, swept the pistol out of Jonelle's grip, while Fabrice lifted his hand, finger and thumb extended and chanted. Light radiated around him like an extended aura, and metal clattered to the ground. Andreas moved forward to sweep up the pistols. "You could have been a bit more specific," he growled, picking up his own with the rest.

The eerie silence ended when Jonelle screamed, a high pitched wail of sheer terror.

Alix heard, saw, but felt nothing but Dev, cared about nothing but him. Blood pumped from his wound, slower now, and although she tried to link with him, he blocked her.

She lifted his head, heedless of the blood, and laid it in her lap, not knowing what else to do. "Anyone know first aid?"

"It'll take a bit more than first aid." Andreas's voice, gentle, now, sounded above her. "He's dying, Alix. He hasn't the strength to shift, and we can't help him now. He's too far gone."

She felt his heart stutter as the blood left his body.

"If he dies, you die," Andreas said, anything but gentleness in his tone, as he faced the remains of the PHR cell.

"What the fuck...?" Steve sounded more bewildered than afraid. With two great, gleaming mythical beasts in the mundanity of a suburban living room he should have felt more than bewildered, but perhaps the mental leap of acceptance was too much for him.

"I'll get back to the department, get a cleansing team." Andreas had switched to efficient. "They know too much. Either we hand them over to the Sorcerers, or we kill them now. I vote for killing, then we'll send the cleaners in."

"No." Fabrice had been affable, quiet, but there was nothing left of that in his tone now. "There's one chance. We're here to collect the jewel of power. It could help Dev, if we can get it to him before he dies. Find it."

"Well?" Alix looked up to see Fabrice's face, set and dark with determination. The determination she felt, too. "Give us the jewel, and we might keep you alive."

"If you kill us, we'll come after you. The rest of our people won't rest until you're dead." Steve must be deeply unimaginative if he couldn't see who had the upper hand. Or that the team were done wasting time.

Laurie extended a sharp, gleaming claw and calmly sliced Steve's clothes open, neck to the crotch of his jeans. Before anyone had time to react, he'd done the same to Jonelle.

Around her neck, on a long, slender chain, hung the jewel.

The black Wyvern gleamed dully in the light of the weak bulb hanging from a cord from the ceiling, and the ruby glimmered, mocking the growing pool of ruby blood spreading across the floor. Laurie snapped the chain and Andreas stepped forward to catch the pendant. He crossed to where Alix sat. "Take this, hold it over the wound, ruby side down."

He glanced at Svetlana who stood next to them. Alix glanced at her and saw the crimson eyes looking back at her in sympathy. Then she looked away, down at her lover. The man who had brought her back to life, given her his spirit and his zest for life. "Please don't die," she whispered. The blood pumping out of his body was his only response. She seemed numb, unable to hold anything in her mind for long, but she managed to remember.

The pendant fit into her palm beautifully. She dazedly took in the engraved figure,

so like Dev in his other form, and did as she was told, pressing the dragon with the ruby eyes over the gaping hole in Dev's head, forcing herself to ignore the despair beating at her soul.

"I'll transmit the words. You say them," Andreas murmured. When Alix nodded, she heard his voice softly in her mind.

"Comitarinase Ondoprinsidem Bria."

She said the words after him, careful to sound them properly. They made no sense to her, but they didn't have to.

A sharp gasp told her someone had recognized the words. "That was what was on the paper in the jewelry box!"

Clay somehow knew the words where she had not.

"If the jewel is still potent, those words will activate it." She felt Andreas's hand on her shoulder, lending her his strength.

The jewel warmed, a sure sign that something was happening. The blood flow had slowed to a trickle now, hardly any of it left, but the warmth spread, too. She felt vitality return, a spirit reinvigorated.

"Now you must help him to shift." Andreas removed his hand, and she felt two other hands on her shoulders. Svetlana and Laurie, back in their human form, joining with her in an effort to bring Dev back.

Power pulsed through her like electricity, flexing every nerve ending, driving through her body to where her palm covered the jewel, and her fingers touched Dev's chest. The power came from within her, only augmented and aided by Svetlana and Laurie. So this was what it meant to be a Sorcerer. The power awed her, but she bent everything she had to the one purpose. Bring Dev back. She couldn't go on without him. She wouldn't. It was at that moment she knew she loved him, knew for sure she didn't want anything or anyone else. She would give her life for him.

Alix had never imagined she'd welcome the sight of the black scales, showing the beginning of the transformation, but she watched them spread over his neck, joy filling her when she realized it was working and Dev was shifting into the wyvern.

Dev's clothes split under the pressure, falling away when the limbs became too massive to hold them. When his body began to grow, she felt the power in her move with a different purpose, and she lent her strength to keep his size reasonable, so he wouldn't crush everyone else with his transformation.

Eventually he lay at peace on the floor, man-sized but a wyvern, his wings folded in to his body, his chest rising and falling in what looked like slumber.

She felt hands lift him off her and realized his head was much heavier in this form, and her legs had numbed from the pressure. Pins and needles tingled as her circulation returned, but she didn't care.

Dev was back, and he was alive. That was all that mattered.

When she took her attention away from him, she saw why there had been no sound to break her concentration. Fabrice had the four PHR members in some kind of thrall, frozen in thought and action. When he saw Dev's chest move in a convulsive breath, he lowered his hand and released them. At once, they surged forward, each heading for Fabrice, but they stopped before they got there. He watched them, one fair eyebrow raised sardonically. "You can't get through."

"What are you?"

He glanced at Clay. "The same as you."

Andy, Steve and Jonelle turned on Clay Lancaster, staring with mouths slightly open. "I wondered," Steve said. "I thought you had something. A double agent, eh? A spy!"

They all read his intentions, even Alix, more intent on Dev than on the activity in the rest of the room.

Before Steve could reach Clay, his hands extended to grab his throat, Andreas plucked him from the air with one hand. "No you don't. We want you all alive."

The collective gasp wasn't unexpected. "They won't hurt you," said Alix absently, her attention still on Dev. "Yet."

Andy cleared his throat. "It's time we went to the authorities. If we don't report to a certain number by ten tomorrow morning, they'll come looking for us."

"Better get the cleaners in fast," Fabrice murmured, and Andreas nodded.

"Don't bother reporting us. We *are* the authorities." Andreas reached in to his back pocket and drew out a small, black leather wallet. Opening it, he showed them the card inside.

Fabrice was the first to speak. "Damn, you're not a consultant? You're an agent?"

Andreas grinned and nodded. "Somebody has to be."

"Does the Company know what it's got?"

He grinned again. "Cristos does."

Fabrice grunted. "Cristos knows everything. Do you know what he is?"

"A man?" Andreas shrugged and glanced at Alix. "We should get him home. We'll stretch out the seats in the van and lay him flat. He'll need to stay in this form for at least another day, then he'll come out of it, and he'll be well."

Alix felt separate, apart from everything going on around her. Unreality struck and she thought perhaps she was in a dream, and everything after she'd first met Dev in her shop a few weeks before was in her head. Andreas bent and touched her hand. "Alix, let me take him." His voice was almost unbearably gentle. She nodded, her throat too full to allow her to speak.

"And bring my clothes," Svetlana drawled.

With Andreas's help, Alix got to her feet and stood for a moment, swaying, while the sensation returned to her lower body. Fabrice moved across the room to steady her, once more the urbane executive, the dangerous Sorcerer hidden. For the first time in her life, Alix felt a sense of camaraderie, and wondered if Clay felt it, too. After all, he had the gift.

She fussed over Dev's slumbering body as Andreas lifted him carefully and carried him into the van, laying him gently down. She didn't look around as Andreas grabbed the bags containing the clothes and swung back out of the van.

"Alix."

He had to say her name twice before she turned her head to look at him. Clay stood outside the doors, Fabrice standing just behind him. His eyes pleaded with her. "I only ever tried to help you."

Her brother. The man who had protected her from the worst horrors of the PHR until the last. When they'd killed her. He'd tried then, but they'd shut him out, wouldn't let him in the room when they brought the equipment in. "Why did you stay?"

"They said they had you captive somewhere. I needed to find out."

She knew him too well. He wouldn't beg or plead; he wouldn't try to play down what he'd done. "That man behind you, Fabrice. He's one of us. There are more than us in

the world, and they can help us. If you deny what you are, it will hurt you eventually."

"I know. It has already. I can't control it."

Fabrice put his hand on Clay's shoulder, not roughly. "You have to be taught. It's not too late, if you choose to let us help. We call ourselves Sorcerers. In previous ages it helped distance us, and stopped persecution. Now it's just a name, one people often misunderstand. You have shown great forbearance to have managed thus far. Let us help you."

"What happens now?"

"We take you in to the department and question you."

Clay spun around to face Fabrice. "Like you did my adoptive parents? They were torn to pieces by wolves. Werewolves."

Fabrice glanced at Alix, and bit his full lower lip before he turned back to face Clay. The glimmer of starlight and the dim street lights lent an almost sinister cast to his clean cut face. "Cristos investigated that. He's our boss. He discovered it was a group of barghests, so yes, it was shapeshifters who attacked and killed your parents. They have been punished by their own kind. Killed. No one sanctioned the attack, it was purely personal. They knew your parents were members of the PHR, and they took the law into their own hands. Wherever we are, we adhere to the rules of the country we're in, so if they had been caught alive, they would have been brought to justice. As it was, all the Department could do was cleanse."

Clay turned and met Alix's shocked stare. "Did you know this?"

She shook her head. "No. But Cristos did promise to investigate. I'm glad he did."

Clay wasn't satisfied. "I want proof." He thrust out his chin in the belligerent stance Alix knew so well. When a boyfriend had been too pushy, when she'd been hurt at school, he'd taken that same stance before 'sorting things out,' as he used to put it.

"You'll get it." Fabrice looked up at Alix. "I'll take him in. Let me know how Dev is in a few days, will you?"

"Of course."

She watched Clay and Fabrice cross the road and head for a blue Volvo parked further up the road. Fabrice's lean, rangy form contrasted with Clay's shorter, wider, powerful frame but inside they were the same, with the same ancestry. Who knew?

Alix returned to her priority. Deverell Wyvern, the man she loved, whatever form he took.

Chapter Sixteen

Alix gently put the phone down in its cradle and took a few deep breaths.

"Anything wrong?"

As usual, Dev was close, waiting for her. As usual, he hadn't intruded on her while she spoke to Clay, but waited for her to finish her call. She lifted her head and stared out the window, at the soft flakes of snow falling outside. "No, not really. Clay's finding it hard, is all." She turned into his arms and they closed around her, warm and welcoming.

"He'll get there, sweetheart. I've been brought up to know all the things he's only just learning."

"Like me."

He gave her a gentle kiss. "You are a miracle. My miracle." He glanced outside. "I love the snow. A shame it won't settle, because I'd love our first Christmas to be a white one."

"Our first?" She glanced up at him shyly. He'd brought her here to his house in the Brecon Beacons, Wales, but she still didn't know what his longer term plans were. He'd taught her, supported her, and she knew he loved her. He told her so, every day, but she didn't know what customs were, how shape-shifters loved. And how they parted. Even more that Dev had been hurt badly in the past. He might not want to risk a deeper relationship again.

She daredn't ask in case she received an answer she didn't want to hear.

"Our first." There would be more, then. More than one. As many as twenty, thirty? Would their love then wear out? Or would he want to move on before that?

She had no answer. Except that she loved him and knew she would always love him. She would have to ask him, she couldn't go on any longer like this. At first, she'd thought she could. Just live for the day, she told herself every time she thought of it. She would live a very long time, but not, perhaps, with the man she loved by her side.

"I've filled the tub. Do you want to bathe with me?" He grinned down at her. "Clay will be all right, love. I've spoken to Cristos. He's very hopeful."

"But what then? He doesn't want to go back to the shop. It's on the market."

She thought she saw a smidgeon of relief cross his face. "Good. I'm sorry you had to lose it, but that shop is a beacon for the PHR. They'll know just where to find you if you go back and we still haven't any proof that your name and information weren't passed on. We eliminated the cell, but there are plenty more. And somewhere there is a central organization, the center of the web."

"But I need something to do, Dev. I can't just—" she indicated the room, with its discreet but expensive antiques. "This is much more than you led me to believe."

"A long life will ensure certain comforts. I've gathered some treasures and many of them are here." The Welsh lilt in his voice was more pronounced here, in his homeland. She loved it, the light, singsong timbre. "You'll collect things, too. Some don't bother, just pass from one life to another, leaving it all behind, but most of us like to keep something." He paused. "Sweetheart, I've arranged an interview for you. The London office called this morning, and I told them about you. I hope you don't mind."

"What kind of interview?"

He drew his hand over her arm, as though he couldn't stop touching her. "In the jewelry department at Triscombe's. You'll have to go through the process, but I'm sure

you'll get the job, if you want it. It's for an assistant curator. Eventually you can make auctioneer, but you need more experience first. You'll value jewels, handle them, assist on sale days." He blinked at her anxiously, his glasses glinting in reflection from the bright winter sunshine outside. "I can always cancel, if you're not interested."

She smiled. "I'm very interested. Thank you."

He nudged her chin gently with the tip of his forefinger. "Just get the job, eh? The jewelry department is completely separate to mine, and the big sales are at different times of the year, so you needn't fear we'll be under each other's feet all the time."

"I'd rather like that." She reached up to kiss him, a gentle kiss of thanks.

He growled, his mouth touching hers. "Come and play in our new toy."

He'd had a Jacuzzi installed. At first, it had been to ease his aching muscles. The near fatal shooting had left more of a mark than either of them had imagined, and the hot, bubbling waters helped to bring some relief. The scar, still red and puckered, would be with him for some time, but would fade eventually. It still gave him some pain, though. For the first month, Dev had refused to let Alix see the scar clearly, growing his hair longer to cover the mark, but one day she had forced her way into the bathroom and joined him in the tub, demonstrating very effectively that the scar made no difference to her attraction for him.

Now she smiled and linked her hand with his, allowing him to lead her up the stairs. In the bedroom connected to the master suite the bath popped and bubbled, echoed by the bottle of champagne which stood open in an ice bucket on a small table its side.

Alix turned a questioning look on Dev, but he merely smiled and reached for the hem of her shirt. He undressed her, tossing the clothes in the corner of the room and slipped off his own robe. She reached for him, smoothing her hands across his forehead, letting her palm drift over the pit the scar had left, the roughness of the healing mark abrading her hand. "You're so beautiful," she whispered, letting her breath reach him and smiling at his resultant shudder. He was already hard for her.

"Shouldn't I be saying that?" Linking his hand with hers, he led her to the bath.

The new tub was a sunken one, made possible by the deep floors in this Georgian built manor house. Gleaming white porcelain and shiny chrome fittings were a far cry from the deliberately ostentatious bathroom in Laurie's New York apartment, but that was what had given her the idea of suggesting it.

At first, they sat at opposite ends. Since the fittings were in the middle, Dev didn't have to be a gentleman and take the end with the taps. He twined his legs with hers, rubbing his toes up her thigh. "Touch them for me." His voice, erotically husky, demonstrated how aroused he was already.

She knew what he meant and she'd long since given up modesty in favor of giving Dev pleasure. Lifting her hands, she cupped her breasts, and slipped her fingers over the peaks, stroking her nipple briefly in passing. The touch was all they needed, that and his avid gaze, and they began to stiffen into hard peaks. She felt them crinkle and sensitize and she closed her eyes, relishing the sensation. "You've taught me to appreciate my body," she murmured. "Thank you, Dev. Before, I was certain I wasn't attractive, not in the least." All the time she spoke she caressed herself, sliding her hands over her breasts, smoothing the silky moisturized water over them. "I love touching myself now."

"You should." His voice was husky with passion. "Your skin is wonderfully soft, beautifully responsive." He slid his toes slowly up and down one leg, stimulating her with soft caresses.

The water lapped around him as he sat up. "Keep going. Drive me crazy." He reached for the bottle and poured two tall glasses of champagne. The wine bubbled and fizzed like the water around her and the feeling growing deep inside. Instead of letting her take her glass, he held the cool rim to her lips.

She took a sip, holding his gaze with her own, her hands rhythmically smoothing and stroking. When she felt his warm hand on her breasts, she smiled and lifted her hand away to take her glass. "I wondered how long you'd last."

"You get better at this. God, *cariad*, I get hard just looking at you. Touching you sends me into orbit."

Putting his glass on the wide rim of the tub, he bent to take one of her nipples into his mouth. His voice echoed in her mind, softly murmuring, encouraging. She returned it, winding her soft tones with his, as she leaned forward to caress him and take his cock in her hand. It twitched and hardened, more than ready for her, but they had time. All the time they wanted.

All the time we want, he echoed, his mouth busy bringing pleasure to them both. She felt his pleasure in her trust and love, and his rising physical pleasure, enhancing her own. When he slid his hand between her legs, she opened eagerly for him, crying his name. When he pinched her clit between his thumb and forefinger.

Dev lifted his head, his green gaze lit with sparks, glittering in the very depths of his eyes. "Oh *anywyl*, how did I ever exist without you?"

He slid his hands around her waist and lifted her on to him. They watched each other as he pushed and she slid, slowly embedding him in the hot, wet depths of her body, the water surging hotly around them.

He stopped, buried deeply inside her. She felt the blood pulse in his veins, beating a steady rhythm inside her and rejoiced that they'd had this second chance.

"I feel it too," he murmured, his voice as much a part of her as the rest of him. "When the bullet hit me the last thought I had was that I couldn't leave you to face your new life alone. I had brought you over, I needed to be here to care for you. But that was wrong. I needed to be here for me, for my own sake. I'd only just found you." He drew her down and kissed her, his tongue gliding into her mouth, caressing and stroking until she felt the warmth inside her increase. Without moving his cock in her body, he could bring her to orgasm.

Gentle, profound ecstasy grew slowly inside her. She felt the beginning as she never had before, the increased sensitivity, the way the head of his penis nudged the spot deep, deep inside her to touch and stimulate. A tongue lapped deeply into her, a chill of pure need swept up her spine.

Only then did he move, drawing back and pushing up, lifting her as he did so.

It was all she needed. Alix threw back her head and howled as all the sensations coursing through her body coalesced into a roaring, mindless orgasm. He held her firmly, drove deep, called to her inside her mind and out.

When it was over, she rested her forehead on his shoulder. He was still hard inside her. His voice rumbled low, next to her ear. "I might just stay here for the rest of the day. For the rest of my life."

She chuckled shakily and lifted her head.

From somewhere he'd found a small, black box, and he clutched in one hand. It must have been under the napkin on the table the ice bucket rested on. Her heart missed a beat.

He lifted his hands away from her and opened it. "Yes, it is what you think it is. I wanted to reduce the chances of your saying no, so I decided to do it this way." She saw a ring, a solitaire, set in a simple gold band. A beautifully cut, pure white diamond. "Only the best for a jewelry dealer, my love. It's not vulgarly huge stone, but it's one of the purest. No flaws. When I saw it I knew it was yours."

Alix caught her breath, transfixed by the beauty of the diamond. This was why she'd wanted a jewelry shop, to get the chance to handle pure splendor like this. The workmanship and the materials in fine jewels had always called to her, above and beyond their value. She reached for the stone and touched it once, very gently. He smiled and pulled it out, dropping the box over the side of the bath, next to her champagne glass. "Will you marry me, sweetheart? I love you more than I thought possible, and I don't want to go on alone. I want you with me, every step of the way."

He stilled, the ring in his hand, staring at her, anxiety filling his mind and hers. She tore her gaze away from the diamond and looked at something infinitely more precious. His face. "Are you sure?"

"Surer than I've been of anything in my life before."

"Will we—I mean how can we?"

He must have caught the reason for her confusion in her mind and he leaned forward, resting his forehead against hers. "Because of this. We've merged minds, love, we've bonded. I am in you all the time, as you are in me. We can't be apart. As time passes, it will only deepen. Couples who are together as long as I want us to be tend to die together too, unable to go on alone. So I suppose I'm asking you to live and die with me."

"Yes," she murmured her voice so soft he couldn't have heard it, but she reinforced her acceptance in her mind. "Oh yes, please, Dev."

He took her left hand and slid the ring on to the third finger. "I love you."

Then he undulated his hips beneath her and drove her back into ecstasy. She clutched at his shoulders, but relaxed when she felt his arms around her waist, holding her close. He wouldn't let her fall.

Ever.

The End