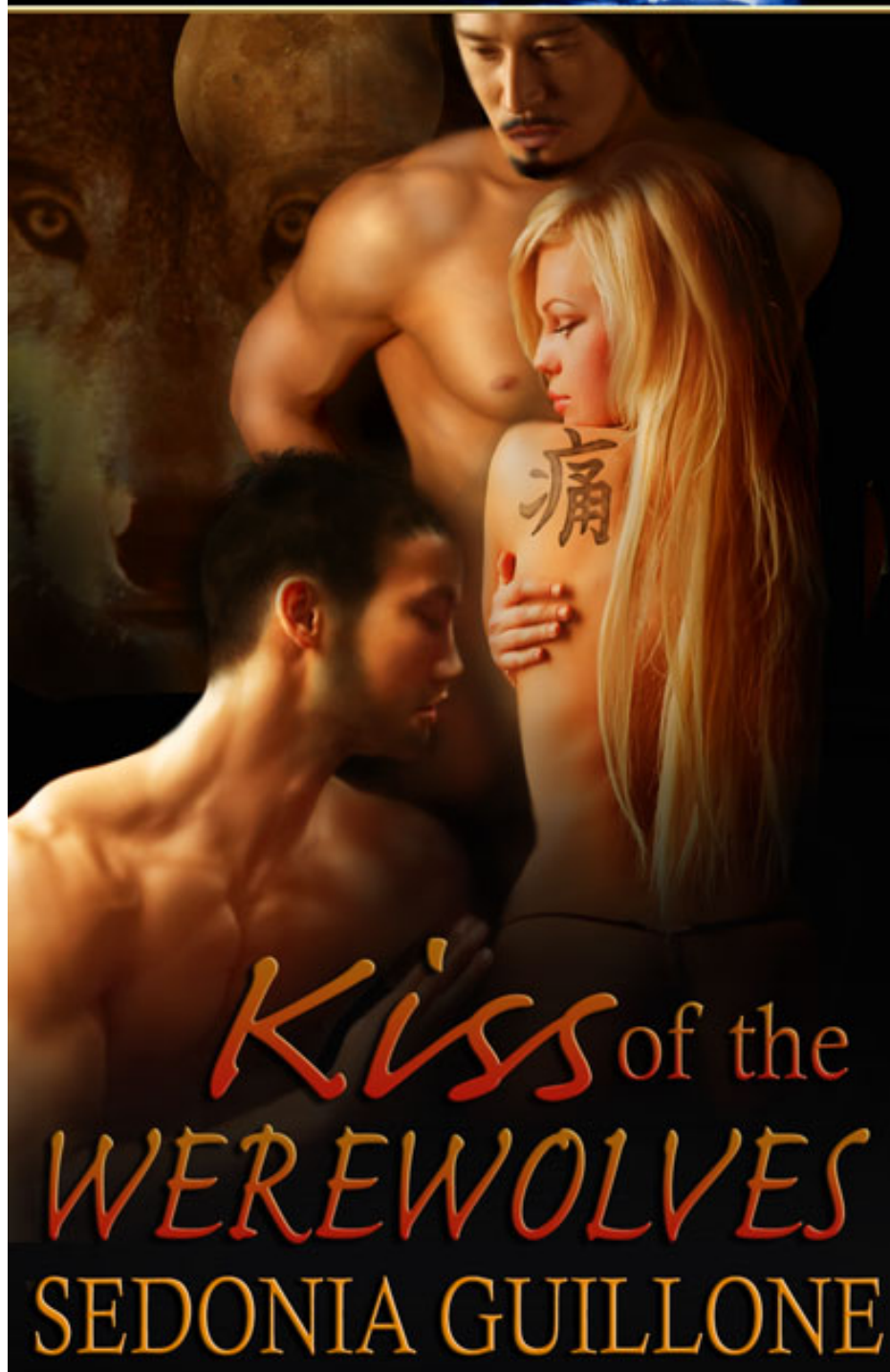


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Kiss of the Werewolves

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# ***KISS OF THE WEREWOLVES***

**Sedonia Guillone**

## *Dedication*

*For Mitch with all my love*

## *Acknowledgements*

As always, I'm eternally grateful to my critique partner, Ruth Axtell Morren, for her help with my work; to Helen, the coolest editor ever; and to Dar Albert for one of the most incredible covers I've ever had.

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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A man with outward courage dares to die,  
A man with inward courage dares to live;  
But either of these men  
Has a better and a worse side than the other.  
And who can tell exactly to which qualities heaven objects?  
—Lao Tzu

## Chapter One

*Xiahe, Gansu Province, China, near Tibet*

The beast was freeing itself. The creature that had invaded his body and soul now scraped and clawed at his insides.

Jie fought the change with every ounce of strength he possessed. In the three years since he'd been bitten out on Sangke Prairie, he'd managed to keep his hated alter ego at bay. Tonight, the full moon's light pulled at his soul with more force than ever, as if the universe itself were angry with him for the creature's imprisonment.

He exhaled, sinking his bent knees into a deeper meditative stance, his arms crossed in front of him at the wrists. He would stand all night in the *wu chi* position, if that's what would center him. Whatever it took to ward off the ever-strengthening demand for transformation from man to ravening beast.

He'd already pulled the shade tight and hidden in the corner where the moon's light didn't quite reach. Grievously, however, the woven grass shade over his window could never be thick enough to shield him from the silvery light whose rays seemed to penetrate his skin.

A shot of burning pain seared his gut. He sucked in his breath, pivoted his upper body and began circling his hands, making graceful arcs, one after the other. Releasing his *chi* had, until now, kept the beast at bay. *Tai chi*, the simple, graceful martial art form he'd mastered as a boy of eight, had been a savior many times in his life.

The pain spread into his chest, fanning outward like evil wings. That deep gnawing hunger the beast carried began to claw at his belly. For the first time in three years, *tai chi* was failing him. The beast was winning.

Jie stepped out with his right foot, preparing for a *bo* stance. Before his heel touched down, another jolt of pain sent him toppling over.

The flames of transformation spread down all four limbs and into his back, like fire through dead leaves. All he could do now was lie helpless until the process had completed itself.

Slowly, he raised a trembling hand in front of his face, watching his nails sharpen and lengthen. Smooth ebony fur sprouted on the back of his hands and fingers. More was growing rapidly all over his body, forming a thick coat on his back, chest and thighs.

He groaned, straining against the agony of change from human to wolf. The power of speech receded, leaving him able only to utter the sounds of the animal.

An unearthly cry formed deep in his throat, his only release from the pain. His howl reverberated through the tiny cottage, swallowed up by the vast prairie of waving

grasses and dry winds. To his horror, he watched the sound emanate from his own elongated snout, past sharp incisors meant to rip apart his prey.

His trousers slipped off as the beast's slimmer musculature replaced his legs.

After what seemed an eternity of torture, the pain and burning receded, leaving him limp, panting. When he'd caught his breath, he rolled over and lifted himself onto all fours, shaking himself vigorously, like a dog that'd just had a bath.

The sudden smell of fresh meat assaulted his nostrils, aggravating his deep hunger. Licking his chops, he turned. Li Yun Po stood in the doorway, watching him, a large bowl of raw cubed beef in his hands.

The old man's gaze penetrated his. No smell of fear emanated from his godfather at all. Li had been a father and a teacher to Jie since he was a boy and his parents were professors living away all the time in Beijing. When Ming An and Tzu Chai were killed in Tiananmen Square, Li had been the one person in his life to whom Jie could turn.

The only other person who knew his secret.

Li bent over and set the bowl on the dirt floor. He rose up again and looked at Jie. "Here, my friend," he said, his soft gentle voice carrying across the room, "I know how you feel about killing. I thought to save you that suffering."

The wolf growled defensively but deep inside where Jie remained, he knew that Li had sacrificed much of his own comfort to pay for this food. His love for the old man deepened, the man who'd taught him *tai chi* so many years ago.

Jie trotted over to the bowl and snapped up a cube of meat. The taste of the food unleashed his ravenous hunger and pure instinct overcame him. Mindlessly, he attacked the large pile, feeding wildly on his godfather's kind offering.

"That's right, my dear friend," Li said, "Feed now and when your moon has passed, I have something important to tell you."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Chinatown, Boston, Massachusetts*

*"Do not fear the werewolf's kiss." Grandfather spoke in his quiet voice. The sound always reminded Megan of waves lapping the shore. His face hovered before her.*

*A pang shot through her heart and she held her arms out to him, the way she had when she was a little girl. "I miss you so much, Lao Ye," she whispered. "It's like death." She leaned forward to embrace him, only to find her arms cutting through empty space.*

*His face remained, however, smiling, the dark eyes looking at her with gentleness. She watched him, her hand out, trying to touch his graying beard.*

*"I miss you too, granddaughter." He smiled. "Do not fear the werewolf's kiss."*

*"Who's the werewolf, Lao Ye?" Desperation to understand his words gripped her. Grandfather had been her teacher for so long and she'd always struggled to understand*

*everything he'd said. This time, she couldn't. She tried to embrace him again but his image began to fade.*

*"Lao Ye!" she cried.*

*But Grandfather's face dissolved, melting into the darkness from which it had come.*

Meg opened her eyes and gulped for air. She heaved several deep breaths before realizing she was in her bed. She grabbed fistfuls of her comforter, letting the soft material bring her into the present. Her heart still pumped as if she'd been running.

Groping beside her, she found Fluffy and dragged the stuffed bear into her arms. Squeezing the bedraggled toy against her chest, she lay quietly, staring at the ceiling. She'd long ago given up feeling foolish for keeping Fluffy. Perhaps a woman almost thirty shouldn't still have a teddy bear but one day she'd thought about how Fluffy had been a gift from her parents just before they died. Fluffy was her last connection to them. After that, she couldn't criticize herself for her attachment to him.

Her dream still clung to her. She sighed, remembering Lao Ye's face and his words. Tightening her grip on Fluffy, she lay still, letting the pain wash through her. Lao Ye had died six months ago but to Meg, it still felt like yesterday. He'd been her best friend, her father and teacher. The only person who'd been there for her when her parents had disappeared. Her father's parents had long ago disinherited him for having married a Chinese woman and Grandfather had stood by his daughter and son-in-law. He'd been the one to break the news to her when their bodies had been found after the plane crash in the Brazilian jungle.

At seventy-five, Lao Ye had appeared to have at least ten more years in him. His heart had said differently. Of course, Meg had wished he would live forever.

The full moon filtered through her bedroom curtains. Meg turned, letting the moonlight splash silver across her face. From the angle of her window, she could see the glowing orb in its entirety. It was getting ready to set and shone against the backdrop of the pre-dawn sky.

Since it was almost time to get up anyway, Megan released Fluffy, set him aside and got out of bed. She stood at the window for several minutes, watching the moon. She'd always loved looking at the moon. Something about it was mysterious and wondrous to her, drawing feelings from deep inside. This morning, however, it made her restless, sent a fluttering movement through her stomach. The moonlight must have shone on her during her sleep and mingled with her grief over her grandfather to produce that dream.

*Do not fear the werewolf's kiss.*

Still, the words sent a strange shiver up her spine. More accurately, it was the word *kiss* that was affecting her. A kiss meant a man. It had been an incredibly long time since Ben. She'd thought she was madly in love with him but when he got a job offer in San Francisco and wanted her to move with him, she couldn't. She hadn't wanted to leave Lao Ye, especially when he was an old man and didn't have anyone else to help run the market. Which was why there hadn't been anyone since Ben. No one understood her

attachment to this place. The men in her generation were ambitious like Ben, pursuing careers that might take them far away at a moment's notice. What guy her age wanted to be saddled with a tiny Chinatown grocery and a homebody of a woman who slept with a Teddy bear and whose idea of an exciting evening was a quart of fried rice and a Bruce Lee video?

Her childhood friend, Danny, had helped her out for many years during school holidays and weekends but after college graduation, he'd gone right to graduate work at MIT and hadn't been as available. Since he'd met Dave, his soul mate, he also had less time.

She watched the moon another few seconds, then sighed and turned. There was too much to do to be spending time at the window staring at the moon, remembering the past or worrying about the future. Like showering and having breakfast so she'd have time to run through her *tai chi* before opening the market. Like feeding Mei, who was now mewing loudly for her breakfast and emphasizing the plea by threading her fluffy white body in a path around and between Meg's feet.

"Sorry, Mei. Breakfast for you first." She went to the small kitchen and opened a can of cat food. Mei's hungry cries increased in volume as Meg spooned some food into the cat's dish and set it on the floor. "There you go, sweetie." When Mei was happily chowing down on her breakfast, Megan headed for the shower to start the day.

When Grandfather was alive, they shared the burden of running the market. She'd even had time to give evening *tai chi* lessons in the studio after Grandfather had gotten too tired to teach. Now he was gone. She was running the store by herself, not knowing anyone else she trusted enough to help her except for Danny. Danny was qualified to teach the classes but he'd just earned his doctorate in computer science and was teaching summer school. His partner, Dave, was also willing to teach self-defense classes but he was taking summer classes to begin his master's degree in social work. They were both very busy.

If she hadn't been so attached to the place and to the neighbors who depended on her, she might have considered the Boston Development Corporation's offer to buy, which they kept pressuring her about. Sometimes, the temptation to sell was almost overwhelming, especially since business was threatened by the new Asian supermarket chains that had recently opened ten miles away.

But she wasn't giving up on her grandfather's life's work so easily. He'd loved the children in the neighborhood and gave the older kids *tai chi* lessons during the summer months when the inner city was boring for them. She intended to resume them as soon as she got on her feet. And so she kept going, with or without someone to help her.

## Chapter Two

The sun had set again the next evening before Jie could move again. After devouring the bowl of meat his godfather had given him, he'd spent the night roaming the grassy plain, allowing the compelling moonlight to pull long, plaintive howls from deep inside his being. At the first hints of dawn, he'd returned to the safety of Li's hut. After the change back into human form, he'd just had enough energy to crawl into his bed and pull the covers up to his chest.

Li must have come in and raised the blind on the window, allowing the dry wind to penetrate Jie's small room. His godfather had also turned on the small lamp on his bedside table.

Jie rolled onto his back and stared out through the window. The change back had been as excruciating as the change to beast and his entire body felt as if it had been mercilessly stretched on a rack until near breaking, only to be stretched again and again, like some medieval form of torture.

A footfall sounded in the doorway. Jie slowly turned his head toward the noise. The sight of Li, holding a tray with a steaming pot of tea comforted him. Since Jie was a boy, whenever he'd fallen ill, Li had done the same thing. "Thank you, Li *sifu*." Jie winced at the way his voice rasped out harshly as if he were just learning how to speak.

Li carried the tray to his bedside and set it on the nightstand. He leaned over and helped Jie to sit up, always surprising Jie with the strength of his seventy-five-year-old frame.

When Jie was leaning back more comfortably against the pillow, Li poured a cup of the tea and held it to his godson's lips. The old man's touch alone was healing, giving Jie the strength to lift his hands and take a long sip of tea, knowing Li had let it cool just enough before serving it.

Jie emptied the cup and lay back, exhaling a long breath. Just drinking from a cup had tired him. If he no longer had the inner strength to hold back the change, was he to endure this torture month after month, year after year?

Li took the cup from him and set it on the tray before lowering himself to perch on the edge of the mattress. He looked at Jie, his thoughts practically transparent in his clear brown eyes. The old man's expression shifted, deepening the wrinkles around his eyes. "Sometimes healing does not mean a cure, Jie. You're a doctor. You know that."

Jie nodded. "I do know." He sat quietly, returning Li's steady gaze, understanding also the kindness behind his words. "Does this have to do with what you have to tell me?"

Li nodded. A faraway look came into his eyes. "In Tibet, the *rinpoches* and *lamas* are found using the stars."

Jie furrowed his brow. Li had told him this many years ago when he'd taken him to see the nearby Labrang monastery. It was the most important Buddhist temple in Tibet, next to the Potala, where His Holiness the Dalai Lama had resided before he was forced to flee the Communist regime. Thankfully, it was one of the few monasteries the Chinese government had let stand, intact.

A moment of concern for Li's mental health weighed on him. Why was the old man telling him something he already knew?

"The stars will tell anyone his destiny. Anyone who asks," Li said.

Jie sighed in relief. Li was an expert astrologist. "Have you asked the stars something?"

His godfather nodded again. "I've been worried for you, my son. I needed to know your destiny."

Jiu experienced a wave of self-pity, something he'd been vulnerable to since the days when his parents would leave him with Li for long periods of time while they taught in Beijing. Since he'd been bitten, Jie already had a sense of his destiny, to fight off the curse of transformation from man to beast each month. He felt a newfound respect for women's suffering, for what it was like for them, knowing that each month they would bleed. Month after month. Year after year.

Only his was a lifetime curse that didn't end after a certain age. He strained against succumbing to the crippling emotion of self-pity, if only out of respect for his teacher.

"Jie, there is a woman for you." Li's soft voice cut into Jie's thoughts.

Jie looked up. *A woman*. The mere word sent sparks of energy into his limbs. To his chagrin, his groin tightened, as if imbued with a life of its own. He hadn't been with a woman since Su Lin had divorced him. With the exception of the female patients he treated, he'd stayed away from women after that painful breakup. His heart couldn't bear having another woman growing to detest him because of his sympathy for the Tibetan people and he'd dealt with loneliness by throwing himself into his medical practice. That is, until he'd been bitten out on the prairie three years ago and had gone into hiding in his boyhood home.

"She is meant for you, Jie."

He looked at Li. "How could that be, *sifu*? How could a woman know about...my curse...and want me?"

"The stars don't lie, son. We lie to ourselves."

Jie sighed. He wanted to tell Li to ignore what he'd learned. He wanted to tell him to let the subject die. But he couldn't. Not only could he not say such a thing to Li, his venerated godfather and teacher, but truthfully, Li's pronouncement had begun to unleash his desire. As much as he wanted to suppress nature, he could not. The word

woman and all that it meant had embedded itself inside him as soon as Li had spoken it. "Sifu, where is she?"

Li rose slowly from the bed. He trudged to Jie's desk and pulled his atlas from the shelf of books on the wall above the desk. He returned to the bed and sat back down, opening the book on his lap.

Jie watched the old man turn page after page, stopping only when he'd reached the United States of America. His heart began to pound. He'd been to England for medical conferences. He had even studied English and spoke it passably well. But he'd never been to America.

Neither had Li, though a childhood friend with whom he'd spent his youth in a Shaolin monastery before the Communists took over, had emigrated to America. The boy, Chen Lem Kin, had family who had owned a market in Boston's Chinatown since the turn of the twentieth century. Li had often spoken of the pranks he and Chen pulled in the monastery. Ironically, it had been one of Li's astrological charts that had advised Chen to go to America to find his future wife and make his fortune.

"Here, *si zi*." Li moved his index finger across the page and stopped on Massachusetts. Boston. He tapped the spot several times. "She is there. In Chinatown. The prediction is that you will know her by smooth ivory, deep jade and golden silk."

Immediately, confusion clouded Jie's mind. "Li *sifu*, how will I find her that way when I can't see colors?" Since being bitten, he could only see in black and white, as if the entire world were colored the same shades of black, white and grays as an old movie.

Li shook his head. His wrinkles deepened as he smiled. "If the Tibetans could find His Holiness the Dalai Lama by the stars, so you will find her." His smile suddenly faded and he lifted his hand from the book and grasped Jie's forearm. "You must go soon, *si zi*. You must accept your gift, or someone else will."

Jie's heart lurched. "Someone else?"

Li nodded. "Another *lang ren*. Not here in China. But he will go to her and take her." His eyes darkened. "Not good for her."

A chill snaked up Jie's spine. One thing he knew for certain, Li did not make up stories. If he said there was a woman for him in America, she was there. If Li said she could be in trouble, it was true. As much as Jie had wanted to hide from the world, he couldn't now and he knew it. Life had been bound sooner or later to force him out of hiding. He'd spent much of his adult life healing others. Even if the idea of having a mate hadn't reawakened his desires, he knew he'd go to help another human being in trouble. Li had always been there for him. Honoring the knowledge Li was giving him now was the least he could do.

He nodded. "I'll go, of course."

Li squeezed his arm. "Go soon."

"My papers are in order. I can leave tomorrow."

The old man heaved a deep sigh and loosened his grip on Jie's arm. "You're a good son, Jie. Don't forget. Smooth ivory. Deep jade. Golden silk."

"I won't forget, *sifu*."

Li nodded and reached over to pour another cup of tea for Jie.

Jie lay back against the pillows. Already, new strength infused him. Though he didn't understand the words and couldn't see the colors, all the same, they roused his deepest desires.

He hadn't even met her yet. She was still on the other side of the earth from him.

Yet he wanted her.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Moscow, Russia*

"Idiot," Ivan Schenko grumbled under his breath. His voice was barely audible above the thumping bass of the club's dance music vibrating through his plush office. He turned the watch over in his hands, stunned by the gall of the werewolf who'd handed it to him.

His lips curled in a snarl and he shot a look at the *zalyavchek* standing before his desk. If Yelin was trying to defect from the Kiev pack to his by this lazy deception, he was about to learn otherwise. Ivan may not have born a *weyre* but he was an alpha, godammit. This low-born beta was not going to make a fool of him. "You think because you have shit between your ears, Yelin, that everyone else does too, *nyet*?" He tossed the watch over the surface of the desk. The object landed at Yelin's feet.

A shadow of frustration passed across Yelin's oily eyes. He bent and retrieved the watch. "What are you talking about, Ivan?"

"That's *sir* to you."

"Sir." Yelin held the watch out in a pleading gesture. "I clipped it this morning from a jeweler."

"From a street vendor, no doubt." Schenko slapped a large hand on the desktop and stood up, drawing himself to all his six foot three inches. He towered over Yelin, who quailed visibly, yet stood his ground. "You think that because I can't see color that I can't spot a fake? I saw you coming from a mile away. I only gave you a chance because I'm soft hearted." He turned to Yuri and Igor, his lieutenants who were standing a few feet behind Yelin. "This is a weasel, not a wolf. Show him the door and give him a nice going away present." A good beating would keep Yelin from coming back and bothering him.

Yuri and Igor, nearly as physically strong and imposing as their alpha master, each grabbed Yelin by a thin arm. Yelin looked like a twig caught between two giant pines. He struggled, a lock of his greased hair falling across his forehead. "No! Ivan, sir! Don't do this! Wait!"

Yuri and Igor started for the door but Yelin twisted and writhed, digging his heels into the carpet with surprising strength. "One more chance, I beg you! I've something no one else can give you!"

Schenko hesitated. He'd heard that one before but something in Yelin's tone made him pause. He held up a hand. "Let him go."

Yuri and Igor halted as if someone had pushed a button. In unison, they released him.

Yelin glared at them, a brief glow of yellow flickering in his eyes, as if he would change then and there. He remained in human form, however, and tugged his rumpled shirt and jacket into place.

"Speak up, Yelin. You've got ten seconds and if I don't like what you have to say, you're leaving here in a body bag." He lowered himself back to his seat. "Or should I say, a doggy bag?" He chuckled at his own joke.

Yelin held up his hands. "All right, all right." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. Quickly he worked open the folds and spread it out on the surface of Schenko's desk.

Schenko leaned over and examined it. "What the hell is this? This is what you are risking your life for? A piece of paper with a bunch of colored squares and weird writing?"

Yelin shook his head vigorously and grinned, showing the glint of a gold tooth. "It's Tibetan script. This is an astrological chart, the same kind of chart the Tibetans use to find their holy people. I know how to read them. That's what made me valuable to the Ukraine alpha. But he does not appreciate my unique ability. I knew *you* would." He waved his hand. "He thinks to trot me out like a trained seal and use me for his own greed."

"And you think that I would not do the same?"

Yelin tilted his head. "Perhaps. However, I know that you treat your own as you, yourself, would wish to be treated. So the saying goes."

Schenko narrowed his eyes. The flattery was for shit. But the chart and what it could mean for him was a different matter entirely. The temptation to believe Yelin was nearly overwhelming and he didn't understand why. It was as if the chart alone held a power over him, making him desperate to have whatever it was showing him. "All right, you bought yourself another five seconds."

Yelin's eyes glowed yellow again and his lip curled up. "You see, I worked your chart just this morning and it shows here that there is a woman for you, a mate. *The* mate."

Schenko caught his breath, grateful for the continuous thump of the background bass that covered the tiny sound. *His mate*. The one thing in the world he didn't have. Money, power, respect. He had all of those things, enough for a thousand more lifetimes. He also had women—humans, she-*weyres*, all of them, at his disposal with the mere snap of his fingers. Shit, there had even been a woman who'd committed suicide a

year ago when she'd learned that he was finished with her. But not the one whom the beast inside him craved. The one woman who would truly belong to him and to no one else. Even if he had another woman with whom he was exclusive, she was not the mate that his nature decreed, the one who would bring peace to his restless animal's soul.

If Yelin was telling the truth, the little shit would have earned himself a cushy position in the Moscow pack. If he wasn't, however...

"Where is she?"

Yelin tapped a spot on the chart. "America. Boston. Where the Chinese live."

"What does she look like?"

"That I cannot tell you. Except that she will give you smooth ivory, deep jade and golden silk."

Schenko sat back down to hide his growing erection and reached for the cigarette he'd set in the ashtray when Yelin first came into the office. The butt had nearly burned down. He took a long drag on it and blew the smoke into Yelin's face. The casual air he affected belied that hungry tightening in his groin. Was it the mere thought of a mate that was getting him hard enough to cut a diamond or was it because she actually existed? "If this is true, then why didn't you tell me this first? Why did you waste my time with that piece of shit watch?"

Yelin grinned. "Would you have given me access to your office if I'd said I'm bringing you an astrological chart?"

Schenko looked at him and chuckled. He took a last drag on the cigarette and mashed it out, making a point to blow more smoke into the other werewolf's face. "Point taken." He leaned back in his chair, staying pushed in enough to his desk to keep his raging hard-on covered. "All right, Yelin. *You* are going to take me to her. If you think you're sending me on a chase to America to have a laugh at me, you're dead wrong. Emphasis on *dead*."

Yelin nodded vigorously. Glee shone in his eyes and his lip curled with his grin, revealing his permanently extended incisors, the birthright of born *weyres*. "Absolutely. I would not have told you this if I weren't absolutely certain."

"We leave tomorrow. Myself, Yuri, Igor." He pointed to Yelin. "And you. Boston is on the water. If there is no mate like you've told me, then we shoot you and dump you in the ocean before we return to Moscow."

Yelin's slithery grin curled his lips, giving him the appearance of being in the midst of the change, even though he wasn't. "That will not be necessary. She is there."

### Chapter Three

Jie prayed he wasn't too late. His plane from Hong Kong touched down in New York at eight fifteen at night. He'd managed to get enough sleep during the very long flight, so after he'd made his connection to Boston's Logan airport, he took a cab to Chinatown even though it was nearly one in the morning.

The driver let him off at the Chinatown Gate. Jie paid him, shouldered his duffel bag and walked through the lion-head gate that marked the entrance to Chinatown. The summer night was mild and slightly humid after a light pattering of rain. The streets were quiet and dark, lit only by the streetlamps and an occasional security light from inside the locked markets and restaurants. He had no idea how large this Chinatown was or where anything was located, so he wandered along slowly, reading each sign and getting a feel for the area so in the morning when places were open he could begin a methodical search for his...mate.

The word always sent an electric thrill through his body. He couldn't imagine how he would know who she was or how he could simply walk up to her and ask her for ivory, jade and golden silk. The whole situation seemed so strange but here he was, now on the other side of the world from his home.

One storefront caught his eye. He stared at it from across the quiet intersection. *Chen's Market*, the sign read in both Chinese and English letters. He raised his gaze above the awning. The brick building appeared to house one apartment above the store. No lights were on and the building sat in hushed quiet. Though the place was locked up, there were no security shutters down and he could see inside. The sight of the place caused a small flutter in his gut. Though the chance was very small, perhaps this was the market Li's boyhood friend owned.

Jie crossed the intersection and looked in the window. It was a typical market as far as he could see. The shelves were piled to bursting with boxes, bottles, jars and packages, of everything from noodles, rice and tea to Chinese teapots and candies. Along the opposite wall, a set of refrigerated coolers showed packages of tofu, boxes of prepared dishes such as eggrolls, bottles of lychee juice and plastic bags of frozen seafood. Produce stands crowded the main aisle, obviously to be rolled onto the sidewalk in the morning.

The glass counter under the cash register and the shelves behind it were crammed with Chinese herbal preparations and bottles. Because of his canine eyesight, he could make out the letters on the boxes, recognizing many of the same medicines he often gave to his patients.

Scanning the interior of the store, he saw another open door that led to an adjoining room. The market spanned the corner so Jie followed the windows around the corner,

finding the room to which the interior door led. Another sign hung in the window, *Tai Chi Chuan*, also in Chinese and English lettering. His breathing quickened and he peered in.

Mirrors covered one wall and the floor was of smooth wood. The room held an aura of peace, obviously from years of people inside practicing the martial art that was connected to the *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu, the ancient Chinese philosopher. The fluttering erupted again in his stomach. Deep inside, his intuition told him that this was, indeed, the connection to his teacher's friend. Perhaps Chen would know enough people in the area to help him locate the woman he sought.

Then he noticed a flyer taped to the window from the inside. *Tai Chi classes cancelled until further notice, due to death in family. Sorry*, was also written in both Chinese and English. The handwriting was feminine, Jie, noted. Perhaps Chen's wife?

He stared at the sign for several moments, then sighed and stepped back. No matter how possible the connection was, he would have to wait until the morning to find out.

To his surprise, a small Japanese noodle joint was open across the street a few doors down. Jie walked over and went in. He ordered a pot of tea and a bowl of noodles, tucking himself into a booth from which he could still see Chen's Market.

The little restaurant was empty except for himself and the man behind the counter who served Jie his tea and went back to preparing the noodles.

Jie thanked him and poured himself a cup. Then he sat back took a small sip and settled in to wait.

Finally, at six forty-five, the lights went on in Chen's Market. Jie caught his breath and sat up, his gaze trained on the store windows. Someone was moving around inside, a young woman from what he could see. He watched her prop open the door and move the produce carts onto the sidewalk, lining them up against the front window. He was tempted to get up and offer to help her but thought the better of it. She didn't know him and it would probably seem suspicious.

He remembered that the store hours sign said the market opened at seven and though he was terribly eager to speak to her, forced himself to remain seated.

Without the carts in the aisles to block his view, he could now freely observe the woman as she moved about, checking the shelves and opening the cash register. He was surprised to see she was white. She looked to be perhaps a few years younger than himself. Her light-colored hair was pulled into a loose bun at the nape of her neck and she had a graceful build, slim and curvy in places that roused an ache inside him, a disturbing need to experience what she'd feel like in his arms. The sudden deep longing to know the scent of her hair and skin assaulted him.

Jie waited the last torturous quarter of an hour until seven, then paid his bill and went out onto the street. The neighborhood was awakening in the mild sunny summer morning. Delivery trucks chugged past on the street while shopkeepers were lifting the security shutters on their windows and restaurants emitted the smells of cooking food.

All of this registered in the back of Jie's consciousness, practically drowned out, however, by the pounding of his own heart.

Drawing closer, he could see her more clearly, registering details of her face and body that hadn't been as visible, blocked by the objects in the market, like, for instance, the push and stretch of her ample breasts against her t-shirt and the slender strength of her pale arms, and hands with short, neatly trimmed nails. The soft beauty of her face with its large eyes, heavy fringe of lashes and delicately arched brows and lips. Even the tiny bump on her nose just below the bridge added to the raw femininity she exuded. Her eyes, he noticed also, were almost an almond shape, making her appear like a Chinese woman who'd dyed her hair.

Approaching the front door, he took in a deep breath and pulled it open.

The tiny bells on the door of the shop tinkled. Meg looked up from the inventory list she'd been studying and caught her breath.

A man had just entered the store and was walking toward her. Make that an incredibly handsome man who could almost have been Bruce Lee reincarnated.

She swallowed hard, trying to ignore the way the light glinted off his short, smooth raven-dark hair, or the way his chest and shoulder muscles strained against his white t-shirt as he moved. She forced her gaze not to rove lower but failed, taking in his slim hips and obviously strong thighs encased in plain jeans.

He carried a small duffel bag and a denim jacket slung over it between the handles. He came to a stop in front of the counter and looked right at her.

She gripped the papers in her hand and glanced away, for fear of drowning in the depths of those large, brown, almond-shaped eyes. For one brief moment, she actually thought she was having a hallucination, a visitation from the spirit of Bruce Lee, her beloved idol and one of the best-looking men she'd ever seen cross a movie screen. "May I..." She cleared her throat. "May I help you?"

He was staring at her, the expression on his face indiscernible. In the seconds before he answered, she took in the sight of his high cheekbones, smooth golden skin and the light shadow of beard covering his jaw and upper lip. That, combined with the bag he carried, gave her the impression he'd been traveling. "I'm not certain. I'm looking for someone." His voice was surprisingly gentle and polite considering his rugged looks and his English was tinged by a heavy accent, as if he knew the language well but didn't speak it enough to become fluent.

Before she could respond, the bell on the door chimed again. She looked up, aware that he did too.

Auntie Yee, Grandfather's girlfriend for many years, came in, her eyes looking strained. She usually looked younger than her sixty-five years but since Grandfather had died, she'd aged. She'd known Meg since Meg was a girl and had often helped Lao Ye look after her.

"*Da Ma*, are you all right?" She slipped into Mandarin, the language Chen had raised her with her whole life.

Auntie Yee waved off her concern. "Oh, one of my headaches. My head feels like it's going to explode. I just came to say good morning." The tiny woman reached the cash register before noticing the man standing next to her. She acknowledged him with a brief nod.

Meg furrowed her brow. Auntie Yee had been like a mother to her and she hated to see her in pain. "Have you been to the doctor?"

Auntie Yee waved again. "No time. Too much sewing."

Meg sighed. Truthfully, she knew the headaches had begun right after Lao Ye passed away. She turned to the assortment of medicines, scanning the shelves for something that might help her. She knew what most of them were—she was just uncertain how to prescribe them.

"Excuse me, maybe I can help?" The man's soft voice reached through her confusion. The mere tenor of the sound vibrated inside her, unnerving her as severely as if Bruce Lee had, indeed, come into the store.

She looked at him, her gaze suddenly trapped in those large brown eyes.

"I'm a doctor," he said. "May I be of service?"

Meg nodded and looked at Auntie Yee. "Perhaps he can find out what I need to give you."

Auntie Yee looked uncertain for a moment and Meg knew it was because she didn't want to impose. But to Meg's relief, the older woman nodded. "Thank you," she said softly.

The doctor set down his bag and jacket and picked up one of Auntie Yee's hands. He pressed two fingers to the pulse point on her wrist.

Meg watched him, stealing glances at his face, at the light shadow of beard offsetting his soft full lips. She looked at his hair, dark, smooth and glossy, short cropped around the sides and a bit longer on top. Her gaze slid guiltily down his arms, over the contours of rounded muscles, over the smooth, dark hairs on his forearms. The lustful way she perused his body reminded her that she'd gone much too long without a man's touch.

The doctor listened to Auntie Yee's pulse for what seemed almost a full minute, then tilted her chin gently upward with a forefinger and looked into her eyes. "Let me see your tongue, please."

Auntie Yee opened her mouth slowly, seeming embarrassed. Meg found herself wishing she were in Auntie Yee's place right now. The doctor seemed to have such a gentle touch.

Finally, he nodded and released her.

Megan and Auntie Yee both looked at him.

He nodded again. "I see that you've had some distress and have been eating too much of certain foods, heavy dense things like animal proteins. They are irritating your sinuses." He turned to Megan. "Do you have *Pe Min Kan Wan*?"

She nodded at the familiar name. Grandfather had always kept that medicine in stock. "How much does she need?"

"One course for now."

Megan reached for the little green box and set it on the counter. "Here you go, *Da Ma*." She looked at the doctor. "Thank you very much."

"Yes, Doctor, thank you." Auntie Yee smiled, though Meg could clearly see that the doctor's mention of distress had reminded her of the man she'd loved. The older woman put money on the counter. She and Meg both knew Meg would give it back to her later but Yee had always had difficulty accepting help.

Auntie Yee turned to the doctor. "Please, let me repay you."

He held up a hand. "No need. Only if you get better."

Auntie Yee bowed to him. "Thank you." She looked at Meg. "Bye, daughter. I must go back to work."

Meg smiled at her. "Feel better."

Auntie Yee bowed again and bustled out of the store.

Meg turned to the doctor, vividly aware that she was alone with him again. The first rush of customers didn't usually begin until seven-thirty. "That was very kind of you, thank you," she said. "She's dear to me."

A boyishly shy smile curved his lips. "It's what I do."

The way his eyes warmed nearly took her breath away, a surprising feat considering the breakneck speed her heart was pounding. "Are you certain there's nothing I can offer you in return?"

"Nothing, thank you."

"At least a cup of tea?"

His smile widened and a touch of humor sparked in his eyes, deepening their chocolate hue. "All right, I can accept that."

## Chapter Four

Meg smiled and came out from behind the counter. She indicated the small table in the corner next to the register. Grandfather had always kept it there for his friends who came to sit and drink tea with him every afternoon. "Please sit down." She'd already made a large coffee urn full of tea as she did every day for herself and the customers and poured him a cup from the spigot.

She set the cup on the table in front of him, poured one for herself and sat down, taking a quiet moment before customers came in. She sipped her tea, observing his polite, graceful mannerisms and watching the corded muscles in his forearms flex as he lifted the cup to his lips. She wondered briefly if it was truly possible to fall in love with a man just watching him sip tea. "I'm Megan, by the way. Megan Phillips," she said when he'd set his cup down.

He held out his hand. "Jie Sing. Pleased to meet you."

She accepted his hand, which closed around hers warmly. His touch was strong yet gentle and sent a jolt of heat up her arm. To her chagrin, a light pulsing began between her thighs. The sensation spread upward, into her breasts, as if her body were crackling to life after a long slumber. Another moment passed before she realized she was staring at him and she blinked as if shaken from a trance. This handshake was much longer than appropriate, yet she didn't want to release his hand.

He too, seemed reluctant to let go, though after one more second, he squeezed her hand gently and released it. A look of bewilderment clouded his eyes and he picked up his tea, seeming to use it was a way to busy himself, and took a sip.

Meg swallowed past a lump in her throat. She hadn't been this nervous since Ben had first asked her out years ago. "You said before Auntie Yee came in that you were looking for someone?"

He nodded and set down his cup.

Meg's eye caught the tiny movement in his throat as he swallowed the tea and she experienced the most wicked urge to press her lips to his neck.

A shadow passed across his eyes but disappeared just as quickly. "Yes. Can you tell me, the name on the sign, Chen, is he here?"

Meg's hand closed around her small teacup. "No. He...passed away six months ago."

"I'm sorry."

She nodded, avoiding his gaze. The sympathy in his eyes made tears threaten to well in her eyes. "He was my grandfather."

"Your grandfather?" He sounded clearly puzzled and she knew exactly why.

She looked at him and smiled. "I know. I don't look like I'd be his granddaughter, do I?"

He frowned, looking sheepish. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean —"

"It's all right. My father was a *tai chi* student of Grandfather's. He was white." Megan found herself spilling the story of her heritage to the doctor. Something about his quiet, gentle manner made her feel like she could tell him anything. "My parents were killed in a plane accident when I was nine. I've lived here with Grandfather ever since." She looked briefly into her cup, feeling suddenly foolish. "I'm sorry. You probably didn't need to know all that."

"Nothing to be sorry for. Nothing at all."

She looked at him, feeling her cheeks burn. There was something in the way he spoke that warmed her and made her know he was completely sincere.

"I lost my parents when I was eighteen," he said softly. "Not as young as you were but I know how it feels."

"I'm sorry."

He nodded. "Thank you."

"What happened, if I may ask?"

"They were killed in Tiananmen Square during the student protests. By the People's Liberation Army when they opened fire into the crowd."

Meg's heart wrung painfully. "That's terrible."

He nodded. "You're very kind. But I was fortunate to have a godfather who's been there for me. Li Yun Po. I believe he knew your grandfather."

Meg immediately knew who that was. Grandfather had spoken many times over the years about Li Yun Po, his boyhood friend in the Shaolin temple. Grandfather and Li had been very mischievous and were always getting into trouble with the abbot. She rose from her chair and picked a framed photograph off the nearby wall, taken of Grandfather and Li just before they parted. Two young men of sixteen standing side by side peered out from the sepia tones of the photograph. Grandfather was dressed in a Western style traveling suit while Li still wore the baggy traditional Chinese trousers, shirt and cap.

She extended the photograph to the doctor. "This is Grandfather with his friend. They corresponded for some time after Grandfather reached America but lost touch when Li was relocated to Tibet by the Communists."

The doctor took the photograph from her. His fingertips brushed hers lightly. Just the whisper of his touch sent warm thrills into her hand and up her arm. Her mind went fuzzy and the room tilted slightly.

She cleared her throat and watched him study the picture, his thick dark lashes resting against his high cheekbones as he looked down.

"Yes," he said after several moments. He looked up at her. "This is Li."

Meg sat back down, her heart beating hard, both from the arousing effect this man was having on her and from the excitement of this visit from Grandfather's past. In the next moment, she realized that Dr. Sing must have come all the way from China to find his godfather's friend, only to find he'd passed away. She sighed. "I'm sorry, Dr. Sing. You've traveled such a long way for nothing."

"Please, call me Jie." He smiled, causing her heart to gallop. "And I didn't come here for nothing."

The bell on the door tinkled before Meg could respond. She turned to see the first customers coming in. The traffic would be steady for the rest of the day. She felt a stab of disappointment. Jie would probably leave now. She looked back at him. "I'm sorry. The customers are coming. You're...welcome to stay."

He nodded in that polite way of his. "Yes, I will."

She smiled, ridiculously happy to hear those words. "Wonderful. Help yourself to tea. It's right here." She pointed to the urn. She smiled at him again, feeling almost giddy. "Excuse me." She turned abruptly to make herself available to the customers before she began to babble like a lovesick teenager.

The moment he said he'd stay, Jie went into turmoil. Could Megan Phillips be the woman he sought? If she was his mate, then he needed to claim her and protect her from the other *lang ren*. But if she wasn't, it meant there was another woman out there somewhere who was vulnerable to his opponent.

He sat quietly, with his hands around his teacup, his contemplative posture belying the storm inside him. Truthfully, the thought that she might not be his mate greatly disappointed him. Megan's scent, a female musk unlike any he'd ever experienced, churned the very air he breathed, making him dizzy and aroused. Since he'd been bitten and his senses sharpened, he'd become aware of all females' scents but none was as strong, as deliciously overpowering as Megan's. His groin tightened each time their eyes met and her smile, sweet and sad, seared him in a place so deep inside he'd almost forgotten it was there. In just minutes, she'd revived part of his heart he'd thought Su Lin had taken away with her, or that the PLA had stolen when they murdered his parents. If that alone wasn't the sign of a mate, he couldn't imagine what was.

He listened to her voice as she helped the customers, the soft, gentle sound resonating deep inside him, stirring his heart.

As the time passed, his hope that she was his mate intensified. Something about her very essence comforted him as much as it roused his desire. In spite of his confusion, he found that in her presence, he felt calmer and more peaceful than he remembered feeling in many years, perhaps ever.

He didn't want to leave. He couldn't.

She too, seemed to want him to stay. Her face had lit up like no woman's ever had just from his saying he would stay. As far as he could see, she didn't have a husband or a boyfriend. Perhaps she was very lonely. No doubt she was grieving for her

grandfather, whom she'd obviously loved very much. There also didn't seem to be anyone else who worked here, meaning Megan ran this place by herself. He admired her strength.

She also understood his losses, having suffered in the same way. Their lives, though so vastly different, had been connected deeply by Li and Chen, the men who'd been their teachers and dear friends. Seemed impossible that this was an accident.

For what seemed a long time, he sat observing Megan while his tea grew cold in the cup. A few times he overheard a customer asking her about medicinal herbs for a certain ailment and he volunteered an answer, touched each time by the gratitude and sweetness in her smile when she thanked him. By late morning, he'd felt almost as many pulses as he did on an average day of his practice back in China.

Li's astrological chart seemed to have led him to Megan's doorstep.

And he wasn't going to leave until he knew for sure.

He looked down again into the pale tea in his cup. The clues Li had given him now echoed in his mind. *Smooth ivory. Deep jade. Golden silk.* The words sounded like a puzzle to him. Somehow he sensed there was a deeper meaning to them than the mere words implied.

It didn't seem logical that a woman would be his mate simply because she could give him these objects. He was in Chinatown and, no doubt, silk, jade and ivory were substances that he could find in abundance in any shop that sold Chinese imports. In that case, any woman who sold such items would qualify as his mate. This didn't make sense.

No. There had to be another answer. Li always told him that the answers would be inside him if he looked and if he believed he could find them.

*Smooth ivory. Deep jade. Golden silk.* He tapped a forefinger absently against the teacup as he reflected. Each substance mentioned invited the senses of touch and of sight. By touching, one could experience the softness, the smoothness of each beautiful thing. By looking, one could see the colors that mystified the heart.

But he couldn't see colors. Ever since he'd been bitten, he could only see in black and white.

However, what if he could see color? What colors would they be? Ivory. Very pale, near white. Jade, green. And the silk, golden, perhaps like the sun, or like wheat. It was not so long ago that he could have seen these different hues.

Suddenly, as if someone had flipped a switch, Jie understood. His heart yawned in his chest and prickles of heat skittered over his skin. He looked up at Megan.

She'd just finished with a customer and there was no one else in the store at the moment. This lull was his opportunity.

She was smiling at him and coming out from behind the register. Her gaze went to his teacup. "Would you like some more tea? Yours must be cold by now."

"Megan, I need to ask you something." He hadn't meant to ignore her offer of hospitality but his inquiry couldn't wait. It was everything.

Her brow furrowed and her eyes clouded. "Of course." She lowered herself into a chair. "What is it?"

"I know you'll think I sound crazy but I promise I'm not."

She nodded. "All right."

He sat up in his chair. "I'm colorblind and I need to know what color your hair is."

A shy smile touched her lips. "Blonde."

"May I...may I touch it?"

"Okay." She looked puzzled but thankfully, not offended. She reached up and pulled out a pin, unwinding the bun and loosening the ponytail. She held out the long strands.

Jie's heart raced. He reached out and took the very ends between his fingertips, caressing it gently. Her hair was soft, dreamy, making him wish it were loose and that he could bury his face in it while he held her in his arms.

*Golden silk.*

He released her hair, pretending that touching it hadn't made an erection spring to life in his jeans. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." She coiled it up and pinned it back into its bun.

"What color are your eyes?" he asked, averting his gaze from the sight of her breasts pushing against her t-shirt while her arms were lifted.

"They're green, like my father's eyes were."

*Deep jade.*

He didn't need to ask her about her skin. It was pale. Pale as ivory. He could see that much. "May I see your hand? I'm sorry if I sound strange. I promise I have a reason."

She looked at him. "I believe you, Jie." She reached her hand out to him.

He accepted it, trying very hard to suppress the raw jolt of heat that shot through his groin at the contact. He let her hand rest in his, turning it over, palm down while he caressed her skin with the fingers of his other hand. There was only one word to describe the way her skin felt under his searching fingertips. Smooth. *Smooth ivory.*

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze and released it. His blood raced through his veins like liquid fire. He worked hard to keep his breathing normal, though the wild beat of his heart crashed in his ears. Every nerve ending of his body crackled. He'd found her. In the very first place he'd looked.

He'd found his mate.

## Chapter Five

Meg stared at him. The ghost of his touch lingered on her hand, long after he'd stopped touching her. She fought to keep her breathing steady. His strange words and actions should have alarmed her, made her ask him to leave but they didn't. This gentle doctor, with his intriguing combination of rugged handsomeness and refinement, had awakened something inside her, something deep and resonant, a sense of life and mystery. She wished he would take her hand again and caress it.

He furrowed his brow. "Did I frighten you? I'm so sorry."

She shook her head. "No...you didn't. Not at all." She craved to ask him why he wanted to know her hair and eye color and why he'd caressed the back of her hand but instinctively sensed that when he was ready to tell her why, he would. She was simply glad he was here with her and that he didn't seem to want to leave.

He smiled, his brown eyes flooding with obvious relief. "I'm glad. I certainly didn't mean to."

The telephone on the counter rang then and Meg rose to answer it. "Chen's Market. May I help you?"

"Miss Phillips?"

"Speaking." She tensed, already recognizing the voice on the other end.

"Rodney Turnbull here, from Boston Development Corporation."

Megan sighed and rolled her eyes. She leaned her elbow on the counter. "Mr. Turnbull, I've already told you, I'm not going to sell." She hated to speak rudely to anyone but this man was always aggressive with her and plied her with letters and phone calls asking her to sell the building, which had been in her family since the establishment of Chinatown in the 1890s. "I can't do it. This is an historically registered landmark of the community and provides an important service, especially to the inner-city children. We do give summer programs here for them."

"Oh, I thought you'd suspended those in the wake of your grandfather's death. I saw the sign in the window."

She held the phone away from her face and made a frustrated, angry face. This guy was low and dirty to say such a thing to her. She glanced at Jie.

He was watching her, a questioning expression on his handsome face.

Sighing, she put the phone back to her ear. "I simply forgot to take that sign down. Lessons have resumed. You can call the community center and ask them. Laurel Chow is the director."

Laurel certainly supported Meg's decision not to sell and had already offered several times to fib for her about the lessons.

Turnbull cleared his throat. "No need. If you say it, it's true. However, Miss Phillips, you won't be able to hold out forever. The sum we're prepared to offer you would make it so you'd never have to work again. You and your family would be very comfortable for a very long time."

A sliver of anger passed through her. The community *was* her family as far as she was concerned and she wasn't going to let them down. And she couldn't let go of her grandfather's store. It was her last connection to him. "I'm sorry, I have customers. I must go."

"Thank you for your time, Miss Phillips."

Meg hung up without another word. She took a deep breath and went back to the table.

Jie was watching her sympathetically. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, basking in the kindness of his expression, and sank into her chair. "A development corporation," she said. "They're buying up buildings all around here. I refuse to sell." She looked down, feeling embarrassed, though she wasn't sure why. "I told them about the *tai chi* lessons resuming as a ploy to keep them away. It's not exactly true but I fully intend to continue with them. I just haven't been able to. There's been too much work to do alone."

She stopped herself. For the second time in a few hours, she'd unloaded her personal baggage onto this man. She barely even did that with Danny who was closer to her than a brother. "There I go again, telling you all these things you didn't ask."

"I'll give the lessons for you, Megan, if it will help."

His quiet voice cut through her embarrassment. She looked up at him. Was he for real? "I...I...couldn't ask you to do that."

He smiled. "You didn't ask. I'm offering. I see that you have so much to do. I'd like to help. I've been practicing *tai chi* since I was seven years old."

The room had begun to tilt again. In one morning, this man had come in and helped her beloved Auntie Yee with her headaches and had offered to relieve much of her burden for her. The issue of having suspended the martial arts instruction, even temporarily, was upsetting for her and he'd just offered her relief. Her stomach fluttered. "Are you sure about this? I mean, you may not even have meant to stay here. You'd be stuck."

"I mean to stay here," he said softly. "It would be an honor."

To her embarrassment, hot tears crowded her eyes. She looked down and nodded. "I gratefully accept your offer." When she'd gotten control of her impending tears, she raised her gaze to his. "But you must let me do something for you in return. You should stay here in our home. Grandfather would have wanted you to. He would have said you're an honored guest." She knew she was babbling now but couldn't stop herself. "That is, if you don't already have somewhere to stay." She realized she'd just used the pronoun "our" as if Grandfather were still alive.

"I don't, actually. I came straight here from the airport."

She looked at him, wide-eyed. "You must be exhausted! How rude of me! Perhaps you'd like to go upstairs and rest. Shower. Whatever you'd like."

His brown eyes glowed with a strange combination of humor and something deeper she couldn't quite identify but it made heat simmer deep in her belly and lower. Her sex tightened and pulsed. She shifted in her seat.

"I'm not tired," he said. "I flew west. You always gain time in that direction."

She nodded, not trusting her voice not to tremble now.

"I would be honored to stay in your home, as long as it doesn't put you to any trouble."

She shook her head. "No trouble at all. You're welcome to go upstairs now, if you'd like. I'm sure Mei wouldn't mind. She's my cat."

A flicker of a shadow passed over his face. "No, I will stay down here with you until closing. No need to go upstairs. Is that all right?"

Again, she felt ridiculously happy that he wanted to stay here with her. She even had the sense that he wanted to protect her somehow. She could live with that. It felt nice to have someone want to be in her company so much, especially since Danny had met Dave and spent less time with her. Before that, she and Danny had been nearly inseparable since seventh grade. "Of course it's all right."

"If there's anything you need help with, just ask me."

"Thank you, Jie. I can't thank you enough." She fought back another threatening onslaught of tears. "It's so strange. It's like you're an angel or something like that."

At her comment, his dark eyes clouded slightly. "I'm not an angel, Megan but I do want to help you if I can."

She looked at him. A frisson of energy passed through her, causing her to tingle inside, especially between her thighs. No, he wasn't an angel. He was a flesh and blood man. A man she was wildly attracted to and whom she'd just invited to stay with her.

And, to her joy, he'd accepted.

## Chapter Six

Jie spent the rest of the day helping Megan in the store. A shipment of boxes came in and Megan gratefully accepted his offer to stack the things in the storeroom and put whatever was needed out onto the shelves, freeing her to help customers.

Around lunchtime, the woman she called Auntie Yee returned, laden down with homemade dumplings, lo mein and bean curd that she'd made just for him and Megan, her way of repaying him for his help.

At seven o'clock, he swept the floor and then helped her bring in the produce carts from outside. When they were finished, he retrieved his bag and jacket from the office so she could lock up the room and then followed her through the back and up the stairs to the apartment where she lived. The closer they came to the top of the steps, the more his heart pounded. Aside from the female patients he'd treated, he hadn't been alone with a woman since Su Lin. Now, here he was with this woman, Megan, who was beautiful and sweet and who seemed to like him very much.

And who was his mate and didn't know it yet.

"Welcome to my home, Jie." Megan unlocked the door and held it open for him.

He gestured for her to go in first and followed her. The first thing he saw was a big fluffy white cat standing by the door, mewing loudly and circling as if chasing her tail.

Megan chuckled. "This is Mei. Mei, be nice to our new friend," she said to the cat in Chinese.

Mei stopped circling and looked at him. Her large feline eyes widened into yellow circles and she meowed loudly.

Megan furrowed her brow. "That's not very polite, Mei." She looked at Jie. "I'm sorry about that. She's probably just hungry."

He glanced at the cat, understanding perfectly well why the animal seemed afraid of him. No doubt Mei detected the canine scent about him that a human nose couldn't. "Don't worry. I'm not offended."

Mei mewed again and raced off, disappearing into what must have been the kitchen.

Megan sighed, her pretty eyes clouded. "Even so, she's not usually so rude."

"Really, don't worry."

"May I take your bag for you?"

"Please, don't worry about me. I know you need to feed Mei."

She regarded him sheepishly. "You're so nice. I just want you to feel welcome."

He smiled at her. "I do."

Megan sighed. "All right. I won't be long." She looked down and made a clucking sound to the cat. "Come on, Mei. Suppertime. Maybe you'll be nicer to our guest on a full stomach."

Mei mewed again and followed Megan into the kitchen.

Jie set his bag and jacket down on the front hall rug and moved further into the small apartment. The main room was simply furnished, with a few silk hangings and cozy lived-in looking sofa and chairs on Oriental rugs. Ferns hung in pots around the windows and many photographs sat in frames on the fireplace mantle and on the bookcases flanking either side of it.

He went over to look at them while Megan's voice carried to him in the background, speaking incessantly to the cat, who answered her with tiny meowing sounds. He smiled at the conversation between human and feline, which gave him the distinct feeling that Megan spent a good deal of time by herself when she wasn't in her shop.

There were many pictures of Megan with her grandfather and others of her as a little girl with the people who must have been her parents. In one picture, the man and woman were holding Megan between them. The man had the same light colored hair as Megan. The woman bore a strong resemblance to Chen. Jie stared at Megan. She'd been an adorable little girl, laughing and smiling. Sudden grief twisted his heart at the horror she must have suffered, losing her parents the way she had.

He stopped in front of another photo and frowned. In it, Megan was older, wearing a beautiful gown, standing arm in arm with a young Chinese man. He was thin and a bit gawky looking but Megan was leaning in toward him, smiling. Her hair was loose and flowing about her shoulders. Jie was captivated by the sight. Next to that photograph was another one of Megan and the same young man. He appeared several years older than in the other photograph and had lost his gawky appearance. In fact, he'd obviously matured into a handsome man, as good-looking as any movie actor in Hong Kong. The young man had his arm around Megan and had his cheek pressed to hers. The picture had been taken outside, obviously in very cold weather, for they were both wearing heavy sweaters and Megan's cheeks looked flushed.

Jie was unprepared for the searing jealousy that gripped him. He could barely move from his spot. His heart began to pound and his blood ran icy in his veins. Perhaps Li had been wrong after all. If the man in the photographs was Megan's boyfriend, then Jie obviously had been wrong about her being his mate.

"Jie, are you hungry?" Megan's voice cut through his suffering.

He turned to find her a few feet away.

She frowned. "Is something the matter?"

He shook his head, fighting to remain calm. After all, she didn't belong to him yet and he had no reason to feel the way he did. "No. I was just looking at your photographs." He pointed to the one of her and the young man cheek to cheek.

She nodded and looked down, smiling at the one to which he pointed. "That's Danny Wong," she said. "He's been my best friend since middle school."

Her answer confused him. Megan and this Danny Wong looked so happy together, so intimate. If this was so, why had she invited another man come and stay in her home? "Megan, won't he be angry about my staying here with you?"

Megan's face clouded. "No. I can't imagine why." But then understanding lit her features. "Oh, you think that Danny and I..." She smiled again and shook her head. "No. You misunderstand. Danny is my dear friend. It's not like that." Her smile faded and she reached out, putting a hand on his arm. She leaned in, as if afraid of being overheard. "Danny is gay." She turned to the bookcase and picked up a picture he hadn't seen, holding it out to him. "That's Danny with Dave. They met last February."

Jie stared at the picture. Danny was sitting on the sofa next to a large brawny white man. The man Megan called Dave had an arm across Danny's shoulders and they both looked radiantly happy.

He nodded. Relief flooded through him with such force that he almost laughed from the release of tension. "I see."

"Danny was finishing his doctorate at MIT and one night he was leaving the campus when a guy pulled a knife on him. Dave was a police officer on campus and tried to arrest the guy but Danny wouldn't let him. He told Dave the man was just hungry." She chuckled, a mischievous twinkle in her pretty eyes. "Danny'd had a secret crush on Dave for months before that. It was a bad start but that night, he found out that his crush had been mutual, all that time."

Jie smiled, his body tingling with relief. "Well, it's good they are so happy."

Her brow furrowed. "It doesn't bother you, does it? Because I do hope you'll meet Danny. He's really a wonderful friend and person."

"I'd be happy to meet your friend, Megan."

Megan sighed in obvious relief. "Thank you. They are very happy."

The note of wistfulness in her voice did not escape him. "It was a big change for you, wasn't it?" he asked softly.

She looked at him, obviously taken aback by his question. "Yes. Danny and I were together almost all the time. Except when he went away on computer consulting jobs. He spent last summer in Hong Kong." She fell silent a moment. "I'm happy for them and they do spend time with me but yes, it's been an adjustment."

Then she looked down at her hand on his arm, as if suddenly becoming aware that she was touching him. Her hand was warm and soft and her touch heated his entire body. He was both relieved and disappointed when she lifted it away.

"I'm sorry, Jie. I tend to babble. You've probably noticed that."

He smiled. The sound of her voice was a healing balm to him and he enjoyed listening to her. "I like to hear you talk. You have a kind voice."

In the soft lighting of the room, he saw her cheeks darken and realized she was blushing. "I actually came in to see if you wanted some dinner. I'd like to make you something."

"I don't want you to go to any trouble. You worked all day."

She smiled. "Well, usually I'm more tired at the end of the day but you helped me so much, I'm not so tired. I make pretty good fried rice. Danny's father owned a restaurant for many years. He taught me how to make it."

"In that case, I'd love some. Thank you."

"Great. Let me show you your room first. This way."

Jie went and picked up his things then followed her into the hallway. She opened the first door, revealing a small bedroom. "This was Grandfather's room. I know he'd have wanted you to stay here."

He nodded, bowing his head. "Thank you."

"The bathroom is between our rooms." She went to a closet in the hallway and pulled out some towels. She carried the towels back into the bedroom and laid them on the bed. When she turned around, a shy expression came over her pretty features. "I hope you'll be comfortable here. Please make yourself at home. I'll have supper ready when you're finished showering and all."

Her apparent eagerness to make him feel welcome and at home touched him. "Thank you very much," he said. "I'm already comfortable."

The smile that lit up her face was so beautiful, he had to fight back the overpowering desire to pull her into his arms. His heightened senses not only registered her scent, which made him wild enough, but her emotions. He sensed her loneliness and her sadness, as well as her kindness and her mutual desire for him.

She cleared her throat. "Well, I guess I should give you some privacy."

He bowed his head again, his calm demeanor belying the raging need she stirred deep inside him. "Thank you, Megan."

She hesitated a moment longer, then went out of the room, softly closing his door behind her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jie showered, using a spray of cold water to help cool the fire that burned inside him. Megan's scent filled the apartment, stirring his hunger for her in places even deeper inside him than his loins.

Thankfully, however, when he turned off the water and began to towel himself off, the smell of food cooking, wonderful smells of garlic and soy sauce, blended with Megan's heady aroma, keeping his overpowering urges to mate with her at bay. As much as the attraction seemed mutual, he didn't want to frighten her by taking her wildly as his body was demanding of him.

He put on a clean shirt and jeans and towed his hair. As he did so, thoughts of the other *lang ren* entered his mind. A tug of anticipation pulled in his gut. How would he know his opponent when he saw him? The *lang ren* who'd bitten him was the only one he'd ever encountered and only that one time. The creature had sunk its fangs into him and then disappeared into the dark prairie, perhaps to wander and lose itself in the mountains of Tibet.

With that one thought, his many other concerns and questions surfaced. If the *lang ren* attacked him in beast form, how could he defend himself and Megan against the creature? He knew from personal experience that the beast's physical strength and ability were superior to the human's. He also would have to wait until his next moon to change and to experience that strength. He could not simply undergo the transformation at will.

He now cursed himself silently for having run away from what he was. Rather, for having *tried* to run away. It was impossible to escape from oneself and he'd lied horribly to himself to have even tried. If he'd faced his curse when it first happened, if he'd learned all he could about his new condition, then perhaps he'd be prepared now to face the other *lang ren*.

He hung his towel neatly on a hook on the bathroom door, making sure he left the bathroom tidy. In the other room he could hear Megan moving about, opening cabinets, working at the stove. He emerged from the bedroom and stood in the hall, listening to her. Every so often she said something to her cat. He smiled each time the cat mewed in response as if she understood the words.

"Be nice to Jie now, Mei," he heard Megan say in Chinese. "He's very kind and I know he'll be nice to you. He's come a long way and we need to make him feel at home."

Her words warmed him, moving through him like a gentle wind. In spite of all his questions and doubts, he was certain of one thing. Megan certainly was his mate.

Deep inside, however, he was sure of one other thing. Even though he hated what he'd become, rejected the beast inside him, he was probably going to have to unleash it, embrace it and allow it to be wild and free. There was no other way he was going to be able to protect Megan from the other *lang ren* who was coming for her.

He took a deep breath and braced himself. He was not yet free to release his passions with Megan and vent the heated tension coiling in every part of his body. It was going to take all the discipline he possessed to be in her presence, alone with her here, and not to try to mate with her.

Thankfully, once they were together, eating the wonderful meal she'd prepared for him, that his mind was fully engaged in their conversation, taking some of his attention off his demanding body. He told her about Li and his childhood in the mountains of what was actually Tibet but which China claimed as its own territory. He told her about how Li had trained him and helped him master *tai chi* and then about his medical

training in Beijing. He didn't mention Su Lin and Megan didn't ask him about his past relationships, so he decided to wait before delving into that painful subject.

In turn, Megan told him about her childhood and about growing up here in this neighborhood with her grandfather. She recounted the beginnings of her friendship with Danny Wong and how he'd nicknamed her the Karate Kid, after a movie that had come out when they were younger, because her grandfather waited for her every day on the sidewalk in front of school to walk her home.

Jie found Megan intelligent, funny and engaging and she made him laugh quite a bit, something he hadn't done in years. She also revealed to him her passion for martial arts films and especially for those of Bruce Lee.

After dinner he helped her with the dishes, in spite of her protests and afterward they sat in the living room and talked some more. He was careful not to sit too close to her on the sofa. However, he could see that she was tired and his own exhaustion finally caught up with him. "I should let you go to sleep, Megan."

She yawned and covered her mouth, looking sheepish. "I suppose so." She sat up and looked at him. "Thankfully, I don't open until ten on Saturday mornings so we can sleep later." He could see from her expression that she too, was reluctant to end the evening. There was something else in her eyes, however. He felt it flow into him and realized it was fear. She was afraid he would disappear during the night. He wanted nothing more than to ease her fear. "Maybe you will let me make breakfast for you," he said. He saw his words sink in and knew by the way her face lit up that his feeling about her fear had been correct.

"I couldn't ask you to do that." Her voice was soft and shy.

"I really want to."

"You do?"

He nodded. His heart thudded again at the sweet smile that curved her lips. She looked quickly away and then again at him. "Jie?"

"Yes?"

"I'm really glad that you're here. It's been lonely since Grandfather died. That probably doesn't sound right, does it? I don't mean it's just nice to have another person here. It's nice to have *you* here. You're so kind, the way you helped me and Auntie Yee today."

"Thank you. I'm glad I'm here too, Megan." A pang of guilt gripped him. He wondered if she'd feel that way when she knew the truth about him. He prayed she would.

"I'm sorry Grandfather didn't get to meet you."

He nodded. "So am I." The fact that he would have to tell Li his old friend had passed away pained him.

However, the more immediate concern was the woman in front of him. The sexual tension that had relaxed a bit during the evening now reared up again. He stood up,

more abruptly than he meant to, for fear that he would pounce on her as the beast inside him wished him to do. She was so sweet and so kind, he didn't want to do anything that would risk frightening or hurting her. And yet, once he revealed the truth to her about what he was, frightening her was the one thing he *would* do. "Thank you again, for everything."

She smiled, her eyes emanating a blend of sadness and what he sensed was desire. "You're very welcome." She rose from the sofa and looked at him again. "See you in the morning."

He nodded. "Yes. Good night." He watched her turn and walk into the hallway, disappearing into her bedroom.

He sighed, his body tense and coiled with desire. Slowly he made his way to his room. The door to the bathroom was closed and he heard the shower running. A wedge of light from under the bathroom door shone into his room. He pulled off his t-shirt and changed into a pair of pajama bottoms, one of the few items of clothing he'd brought with him and lay down on the bed, his hands laced together behind his head.

Unfortunately, knowing that she was a few feet away, naked, he couldn't stop imagining what she would look like, her hair loose down her back, flowing over that smooth, soft skin. He imagined rivulets of water streaming over her breasts, beading off the tips of her nipples and down her buttocks.

A raging erection sprang immediately, almost painful in its force. Jie rose from the bed and used the small space in the bedroom to run through his *tai chi*, distracting himself, however, with partial success until the water in the shower turned off and the light in the bathroom went out.

Megan's room was quiet. The water from the shower temporarily doused her scent, enabling him to lie back down and, eventually, fall into a restless sleep.

The sound of a loud cry woke him. He sat bolt upright listening.

"*Lao Ye! Lao Ye!* No, don't go!"

His blood ran cold. It was Megan. She was having a nightmare. He knew only too well the force of such dreams. He'd had plenty of them for years after his parents had been killed.

Without another thought, he threw back the covers and headed for her bedroom.

## **Chapter Seven**

Megan flailed her arms in the darkness. Her mind was half-aware that she'd been dreaming again, that Grandfather was a vision of her grieving heart and not flesh and blood.

However, this time, her hands landed on something solid. Something warm. Someone was here with her.

"It's all right, Megan. It's all right." The male voice was soothing and kind.

Someone was reaching for her. Arms that were strong and gentle closed around her, pulling her into an embrace.

Jie.

"You're not alone," he said softly. "Lean on me."

His gentle invitation and the feel of his hand slipping into her hair, cradling the back of her head washed through her. She clutched him and fell forward, curling up in his arms. Before she could stop herself, she began to sob, wetting the bare skin of his shoulder.

"I miss him so much!" she cried between guttural sobs. Grief for every time she awoke from her dream and remembered that Lao Ye was gone, tore through her in wrenching gusts. Jie's arms around her and his warm strong body against hers seemed to absorb everything that poured from her, allowing more to pour out.

Jie continued to hold her, even as her sobbing exhausted itself, his hand caressing her back. "I understand, Megan," he said softly, against her hair.

She squeezed him in her arms. He made her feel so safe, like nothing could harm her. Her palms lay flat on the planes of muscle in his back. Now that she had cleansed some of her grief, she was suddenly, vividly aware that he wasn't wearing a shirt. Her awareness expanded to include the fact that the only thing separating their bodies was her flimsy cotton tank. Her breasts rested against his chest and every breath she took caused a bit of friction against her nipples, which tightened and tingled.

Her breathing grew heavier and the tingling sensation in her breasts spread downward, traveling along an invisible cord in her belly that ended between her thighs. The clean scent of his skin, a mixture of soap and man suffused her senses and the same wild urge she'd experienced earlier that day to press her lips to his neck seized her. She suppressed it, afraid that such a bold action would frighten him away.

He slipped his arms from around her and sat slowly back. The movement created a terrible sense of space between them.

Megan was afraid he would get up and leave but several seconds passed and he didn't move. In the shadowy darkness, she noticed that his bare chest rose and fell in a

ragged pattern. Though she could see the outline of his face, the high cheekbones and strong jaw, the flat bridge of his nose, she couldn't see into his eyes.

"Are you all right, Megan?" Concern weighed down his gentle voice, although she did not miss the slight huskiness that now infused it. He reached for a tissue from the box on her nightstand and handed it to her.

She nodded, accepting the tissue, wishing he still held her in his arms but afraid to ask him to hold her again. "I'm better, thank you." She wiped her cheeks and blew her nose. "I dream of Lao Ye every night. It's like I've completely forgotten he's gone and when I reach for him, he disappears." Fresh tears slipped out onto her cheeks. "That moment always hurts so much."

He nodded. "I know."

She sniffled and wiped her nose again, feeling suddenly sheepish. "I'm sorry I woke you."

"I'm not."

His words intensified her sensual awareness of how he had felt in her arms. Had he experienced the same thing or had he simply been comforting her? Either way, to awaken from one of her dreams and to find him pulling her into his arms to soothe her, had been the sweetest thing to happen to her in so long. Since Grandfather died she'd felt mostly sad, even with the solace of Danny's friendship. She didn't want Jie to leave and go back to his room but wasn't sure if she should tell him how she felt.

"I don't want to keep you up if you're tired," she said softly.

She sensed his hesitation, as if words hovered on his lips but he didn't speak. The sound of his breathing, steady but ragged, filled the silence. To her surprise, he reached for her hand, squeezing it between both of his. One of his fingertips brushed back and forth on her skin the way he had done in the store, a warm feather-light touch that caused her entire body to hum pleasantly.

She looked at him, unable to see his expression in the darkness, in spite of the silvery moonlight stealing between the blinds, outlining his muscular shoulders and the powerful v-shape of his torso. "Is something wrong, Jie? Did I do something wrong?"

To her relief, he shook his head. "No. You've done nothing wrong. It's been so long since I've spoken with someone...with a woman...the words don't come easily."

Her breath caught softly. She didn't expect the stab of jealousy that sliced into her at the mention of the word *woman*. She realized she didn't know anything about him except that he was a doctor and had traveled from China looking for Grandfather. Strange that she instinctively trusted him deep inside, although now she wanted very much to know who the woman was. Hopefully someone of the distant past. "You can say anything to me."

"I have so much to tell you but I...don't want to frighten you."

Her heart began to race. What in the world could he possibly have to tell her? "I don't feel frightened," she said in a near-whisper. "I feel safe with you, actually. Very safe."

He bowed his head. "I'm honored." He looked back up and leaned slightly in to her. "Because I'm...falling in love with you."

*Falling in love with you.*

She let out a small gasp. The statement, made in a warm yet matter-of-fact way, hung in the air. Those were the last words she'd expected him to say. Her heart fluttered, the sensation growing stronger as the words sank more deeply into her consciousness. She remembered watching him sip his tea that morning and how taken she'd been with his gentle mannerisms that so offset his rugged, muscular physique and appearance. Something in her had wished—no, ached—for him to be taken with her too.

"Jie," she said softly, "It's mutual." The confession slipped from her, borne on the rising tide of elation inside her. She fell silent, suddenly awkward. Jie seemed so reserved. He was from the Old World so to speak. Maybe a woman speaking boldly would turn him away. "I hope that doesn't bother you."

To her surprise, he chuckled softly. He raised her hand to his cheek, pressing it to his skin. "Why would that bother me?"

The feel of his cheek under her hand caused her breath to hitch. The warmth traveled in a tingling ball of heat down her arm and into the rest of her body. Her already tightening nipples tingled even more and her breathing deepened. She wanted him to kiss her so badly, the desire made her ache. "Because... I don't know. I was afraid I'd make you go away."

Jie closed his eyes and pressed her hand more snugly to his cheek. If only she knew. Knew that he'd traveled to the other side of the earth in search of her. She believed it was Chen he'd sought. She was wrong. If she knew, she wouldn't be so worried, perhaps, about such a thing.

He was collecting himself, gathering his control so that when he kissed her, he wouldn't lose his mind and ravage her, desperate to satisfy the gnawing hunger that her mere scent roused in him. Her hair was still slightly damp from her shower earlier and the silky feel of it caressed his fingertips as intensely as her scent filled him. He knew that his erection tented the thin material of his pants and was grateful for the darkness that covered it, lest she think that all he wanted from her was to sink his dragon into her cinnabar cave and be done with her.

Besides, she also wouldn't worry if she knew of his own terror of repulsing her with the truth. He was a *lang ren*, a wild creature, something he saw as base and vile. He couldn't imagine her accepting that part of him, no matter how sweet and kind she was. He could only hope that the same stars that had pronounced her as his mate would also predict her unconditional surrender to him.

He lifted her hand from his cheek and dared to press his lips into the soft flesh of her palm. He heard her small intake of breath at the contact of her hand with his lips. The increasingly ragged sound of her breath filled the air around them. Her female scent pervaded the air as well, conveying to him the effect he was having on her. Her own longing and need carried on the sound of her breath and in the gush of pheromones from her skin.

He parted his lips slightly and brushed the tip of his tongue on her skin. The taste of it was salty-sweet. He moved closer to her wrist, touching the tip of his tongue to the tiny pulse.

She let out the tiniest of moans.

The sound ripped through him, reverberating along every nerve ending in his skin.

"Jie," she whispered.

Her skin was softer than any other skin he'd experienced. And the scent of it was more potent than an entire field of wildflowers. Thought and reason began to melt swiftly away and he moved his kisses up her arm, his lips slightly parted so he could taste every inch. He reached the inner crease of her elbow and stopped, brushing his lips in a heated motion over the baby-soft skin there.

Her breathing had gone quite ragged and crashed in his ears, while her musky scent, the raw scent of her sex permeated the air. He continued up her arm, feeling her upper body fall gently backward against the pillows. He moved with her, nibbling tenderly on the supple skin of her inner arm, tracing the firmness of her biceps with his seeking lips.

He felt her hand curl gently into his hair, smoothing over the back of his head, cupping the column of his neck.

That was it. He couldn't hold back any longer. He pressed his lips onto her bare shoulder, lingering there for several moments, his hands resting on her forearms. He leaned forward, slipping his arms around her, his hands splayed on her back. Only a very thin material separated his hands from her skin. Her full breasts, the nipples hardened, formed small peaks against the soft material.

She returned his embrace. The hand that had rested on his neck, now slid lower, pressing into his back.

The embrace brought her close, close enough that her breath pulsed warmly on his lips. He hesitated for one moment, gathering his control again. In spite of his raging need, he wanted to pleasure her, bring her body to the height of enjoyment before he took for himself.

Another heartbeat passed and he lowered his mouth onto hers. Her lips were soft, petal-like and a tiny whimper of pleasure vibrated in her throat. Her response encouraged him and he slanted his face, sinking his lips more firmly onto hers. He rested there, the tip of his tongue venturing out to taste her.

She whimpered again. The sound rippled through him, urging him on. He pulled back slightly and brushed his lower lip against hers.

Meg's chest rose and fell heavily. Her body was rapidly melting open under Jie's kisses and from the contact of his solid warmth around her. At first, his explosion of passion had startled her. He'd seemed so staid, so reserved. But as he'd moved his lips up her arm, tasting her so sensuously and so heatedly, her startlement dissolved rapidly into surrender.

She parted her lips, moaning softly in her throat as his tongue slipped inside, sliding urgently against hers. Never before had she so deeply lost herself in a kiss.

He deepened the kiss, his tongue swirling with hot demand against hers. A groan vibrated in his throat, conveying the pent up desire she felt him unleashing.

His body covered hers, pressing her breasts down, pushing her back into the pillows.

Suddenly he pulled away from their kiss. Reaching one hand under the covers, he pulled something out. She realized with horror what it was. Fluffy. She'd forgotten about her bear, which spent every night getting buried deeper into the bedclothes as she slept. The heat of embarrassment tingled in her cheeks. He'd certainly get turned off now. "That's Fluffy." She heard the sheepishness in her voice. "I've had him since I was small."

Jie held Fluffy in front of him. "Hello, Fluffy. I'm pleased to meet you."

To her relief, there was no teasing in Jie's voice. He sounded as polite as he had when speaking to her or the customers in her shop. However, the fact that she was a grown woman with a stuffed animal in her bed was no less mortifying under these circumstances, especially considering that Ben used to tease her mercilessly about Fluffy. "I'm so embarrassed," she said, wishing the bed would swallow her up.

"Don't be, Megan. If you've kept him this long, he must be very important to you."

"My parents gave him to me shortly before they died."

Jie nodded. "I understand." He leaned over and set Fluffy gently down on the night table. "You stay here, Fluffy, where we won't crush you."

Meg sighed her relief, her tension easing. "Thank you for not laughing at me."

Jie reached up and smoothed back her hair. "That is not something to laugh about, considering what happened to you. Fluffy obviously is an important connection to your parents." He leaned into her and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. "I have several of my parents' books," he went on. "For me, they are a tangible connection. I would be devastated if anything happened to those books."

His tenderness nearly overwhelmed her and once again, the salty sting of hot tears crowded her eyes. "Maybe I was right after all," she said softly, "Maybe you really are an angel."

He caressed her hair again and nuzzled her cheek with his lips. The contact sent sparks of heat straight into her already pulsing sex.

"No," he murmured against her skin, "I'm a flesh and blood man who wants you very much." He shifted against her. His erection pressed into her thigh, hard and full. He kissed her again, feathering the tip of his tongue along the soft underside of her jaw.

Meg felt her body melting open all over again under the moist heat of Jie's mouth. Suddenly, however, he tensed.

Her stomach lurched and she was certain she'd done something wrong. "Jie, what is it?"

"I just remembered I don't have...anything with me."

For a moment, she was puzzled and then she understood. He was worried about getting her pregnant or about disease. "It's all right," she said. "I'm on the Pill. I started having bad problems after Grandfather died. From the stress, I suppose. I went to the doctor and she prescribed them for me. It's not as though I've needed them for this, however. It's been a very long time..." She trailed off when she felt him grow even more still. As if she could read his thoughts, she felt his jealousy heat the air around them. The need to explain overwhelmed her. "He was my only boyfriend ever...well...until...you."

His body relaxed against hers and she sensed his relief. "You don't have to explain, Megan." His voice sounded guilty but his fingers still curled tenderly in her hair. "I have no right to ask."

"I want you to know, if it helps. We started dating shortly before I graduated college. We were together for a couple of years after that. But when he got offered a job in San Francisco, I couldn't bring myself to go with him. I couldn't leave Lao Ye. I wished he'd waited for another job or had wanted to stay. But he really wanted to go." She sighed. "Perhaps if I'd loved him enough, I'd have gone with him." It felt strange to be telling him all this, especially in such a heated moment, but it also felt right.

Jie was silent and she wondered what he was thinking. Several moments passed with him saying nothing and simply caressing her hair. "Perhaps if he'd loved *you* enough, he would have stayed," he said finally.

The simple statement shot through her. She'd never thought of it that way, never considered such a thing. Then again, her father had loved her mother so much he'd endured his family's coldness for years. Yes, a man could love a woman that much. Another frisson of heat coursed through her and she snuggled closer to Jie, closing her arms around him. The strange thing was, she'd barely known Jie an entire day and night and yet she knew deep in her bones, that if he asked her to go somewhere else with him, anywhere in the world, she'd go. She also sensed he would have stayed with her to help her with Grandfather, that Jie would never have put her in the position that Ben did.

"You shouldn't have had to make such a choice, Megan."

More heat bolted through her. In that moment, she fell helplessly, hopelessly in love with him. "Thank you," she whispered. "I was right not to go with Ben to San

Francisco," she went on. "Only six months after he left, he'd called to tell me he'd just gotten engaged to be married."

"Ah, I see."

Meg heard pain in his voice and hoped it wasn't more jealousy.

"I feel for you, *ai ren*," he went on. "I have been through pain like that myself."

Jie's use of an endearment with her sent pleasant warmth rippling through her body. The warmth, however, was followed by a sharp stab of jealousy. If he understood what she'd gone through, he'd obviously had a serious relationship himself. "I don't want to pry," she said, knowing full well she wouldn't get relief from the green-eyed monster until she knew.

Jie brushed the pad of his thumb across her cheek. "I want you to know everything about me, Megan." He continued to stroke her cheek, his touch moving with sensual warmth down the side of her neck. "Not long after my parents died, I started my medical training in Beijing. Su Lin was a fellow student. I was lonely and craved companionship. We married without knowing each other very well. As time passed, however and Su Lin learned of my sympathy for the Tibetan cause, she grew to hate me. She was completely in agreement with the government's policies concerning the destruction of the Tibetan peoples' world and customs. I find it reprehensible.

"Our marriage lasted seven years. Five years ago, she demanded a divorce. I agreed, of course, so that she would be free to find someone whose political leanings matched hers. I was very fortunate that at least she cared enough about me not to report me. I could have ended up in a gulag as a traitor." He sighed, remaining silent for several moments. "Just as you said earlier, perhaps if I had loved her enough, I would have been able to put my personal feelings aside."

The thought of anyone hating Jie because he had sympathy for those who were suffering angered her. The thought of this gentle, kind man being in a prison camp horrified her beyond words. "You shouldn't have to do that, ever, Jie," she murmured, working to keep the anger from her tone. "If you love someone, you accept them, even if you don't like everything about them."

Jie bowed his head, his fingertips resting delicately on her cheek. "You're very kind, Megan."

Megan heard an undertone of deep distress in his voice and her heart melted. How he had suffered himself. "It's just true."

"I suppose there is another way to look at our losses," he said after another moment.

"How's that?"

His fingers flattened on her skin until he was cupping her cheek. "The way to see it is that we weren't meant to be with those others...because you are my destiny and I'm yours."

## Chapter Eight

His words caressed her with an almost physical force, touching her so deeply inside, tears pooled in her eyes and slipped out, unhindered. "Jie, do you really believe that's possible?" She and Danny had often talked about such a possibility for each of them. When Danny met David Pearce, she'd seen by the love and passion that had ignited between them that it was possible. Danny and David adored each other and every day they had together was special for them. The more time she'd spent with them, the more she'd craved such a relationship for herself. She just hadn't been so certain it could happen to her.

Jie leaned his face closer, his breath warm on her skin. He pressed a kiss to her lips, the touch delicately soft and warm, yet burning with need. The kiss lasted only a moment. He pulled away, remaining so close to her, she still felt his breath pulse warmly across her lips. "I don't only believe it, Megan. I know it to be true. The universe, or whatever force brings people together, knows our hearts before we do."

Her hands still rested on his back. His bare skin was warm against her palms, making her aware of the hard chiseled muscles that rose and fell with each ragged breath. "I can't imagine a better destiny," she whispered, hearing the catch in his breath at her words.

His hand slid delicately down the side of her throat and came to rest palm down on her upper chest, his fingertips resting lightly on the ridge of her collarbone. "I hope you will always feel that way," he said.

His touch on her chest, so close to her breast set her heart crashing wildly. Her body trembled both with complete nervousness at being on the verge of opening so intimately to a new man and with the raging desire he roused in her. Just the clean masculine scent of his skin and hair made her shiver pleasantly and feel as if she was the luckiest female on the face of the earth.

Her breathing deepened yet more and the moon's light spilling through the window highlighted his hand on her chest, rising and falling with her ragged breathing.

"Megan," he whispered, "I don't want to push you at all. I will do only what you want."

His tender statement fueled her arousal and she nearly moaned. She wondered if it was truly possible that she was as safe with Jie as he made her feel. She reached up and curled her fingers into his hair, loving the sleekness of it against her fingertips. "I want everything." Her voice was a trembling whisper and she slid her hand to the strong warm column of his neck, silently urging him with subtle pressure to kiss her again.

Her other hand slid down to the small of his back, her fingertips tracing the valley of his spine between the two ridges of muscle on either side. She resisted the urge to slide her hand under the waistband of his pajama pants.

Without another word, Jie lowered his face, slanting his lips over hers. The kiss was tender, as before, yet the same passion that had been there when he'd trailed kisses up her arm seethed under the surface. He slipped his tongue between her lips and tasted her with gentle yet barely concealed fervor.

The moist warmth of his tongue sliding languorously against hers sent trails of heat spiraling down her body, ending in the moist juncture between her thighs. His hand slid downward, coming to rest on her breast, over the thin cotton of her tank. With great tenderness, he squeezed the swell of flesh, then sought her nipple, which he tugged between his thumb and forefinger.

Jie lifted his lips from hers. "Do you like that?" he whispered in a ragged voice.

She nodded her head against the pillow, arching her torso. Her tank slid up her rib cage, stopping at the under side of her breasts. Wordlessly, she took hold of the hem and lifted it up, exposing her breasts. She pulled it the rest of the way up, cast it aside and looked at Jie from under heavy lids. She surprised herself at her own boldness but he'd set something loose inside her and she was helpless to stop.

Jie was staring down at her, his simmering brown eyes widening. "Megan," he breathed, his chest rising and falling raggedly, "You're so beautiful."

In spite of the wanton way she'd pulled off her shirt, she felt her cheeks redden. The awe in his voice was unlike any tone she'd ever heard and she felt herself falling under its spell. "Thank you."

Jie lowered himself down again and kissed her. He slid his tongue against hers and then pulled away, continuing his kisses down her neck and chest. Each hot touch of his lips sent her further into the erotic abandon into which she'd fallen. She laced her fingers into his hair, following the movement of his head.

With his hands, he gently pushed her breasts together. He lowered his mouth to one nipple and sucked on it. After the tip had hardened, he dragged his tongue across to her other nipple and laved it to a tingling peak, repeating the same thing several times until her pussy tingled so furiously, she thought she would come just from the passion he was unleashing on her breasts.

Jie looked up at her face, His heavy breathing filled the air around them. He released her breasts and took hold of the waistband of her pajama pants, sliding them down and off her in one quick motion.

Megan felt her cheeks heating again in spite of the feverish desire pulsing through her body. Her eyes never left him and she watched him take hold of her knees and spread her legs open. Her breath caught when he smoothed his hand over her belly.

"I'm sorry you've had pain here," he whispered. "I'll do whatever I can to help you, if you wish."

His touch was warm and sent heat radiating into her womb. She felt as if his touch alone could take the pain away. She nodded. "Yes, I do wish."

He continued to caress her stomach, his breathing deepening more with each passing moment. "Megan, you've already opened your jade gate to me, haven't you?" He raked his fingertips through the curls on her mound and then whispered his touch down the length of her slit.

The intimate contact made her shiver pleasantly. She was familiar with the term he used. Yee had used the words of the *Tao* to teach her about the secret world of men and women when she'd been old enough to learn. She nodded, her lips slightly parted. "Yes, Jie."

He slipped two fingertips between the fleshy lips and caressed her moist swollen clit. His touch burned like icy fire, nearly sending her over the edge. Her eyes fluttered closed and she tilted her head back, arching her pelvis upward.

Suddenly she felt Jie's breath pulse hotly over her clit. That same toe-curling sensation the touch of his hand gave her swept through her entire body just as he swiped his tongue across the same spot he'd been caressing. Hungry for more, she arched her pelvis upward, giving herself completely to his loving mouth.

"Mmm," he murmured deep in his throat. He settled his body onto the mattress, his face pressed to her open sex, accepting her offering.

Her hands fisted the bedclothes, anchoring her. She felt if she didn't hold on, she'd spin out, off into space, catapulted from her body by this overwhelming pleasure.

Jie closed his mouth over her most intimate core, sucking and licking with greedy strokes of his tongue. He slipped a finger inside her, pulsing it in and out as he ate her.

Her breath came in uneven gasps, deeper and deeper the closer she came to release. The heat was building rapidly and then exploded, practically lifting her body off the bed.

He didn't stop. As the waves of release plowed through her, he stroked her and licked her in subtle ways that prolonged the sensations.

Her vision blurred and she lost all sense of thought until Jie had finally wrung every last drop of her orgasm from her body. She went limp under his mouth and hands.

He ran the tip of his tongue one more time over her clit and then looked up at her.

She stared back at him, unable to formulate speech. Her breasts rose and fell heavily and she could only lie there motionless except for her heavy breathing, feeling like a satiated cat. Finally after several moments, she felt the power to speak seep back into her. "What can I do for you, Jie?" she breathed.

He smoothed the palm of his hand up her thigh, continuing the length of her body and over her breasts, his breathing ragged. "Tell me that I can have you now."

His fevered request stirred her longing again. "Of course." She watched him slip off his pajama pants, resisting the urge to turn on the light so she could see his naked body better.

He dropped his clothing to the side and leaned over her. He settled his muscular body between her legs and lowered himself gently onto her.

The head of his erection pressed into her slit. She reached down and guided him inside her. Her sex was completely open and moist from when he'd eaten her and he sheathed his erection deep inside her easily.

It had been so long since she'd felt a man inside her, the first contact made her gasp.

He stopped and looked down at her. "I'm not hurting you, am I?"

She shook her head. "Not at all."

His sigh of relief was audible. He leaned down and kissed her, his upper body sinking down onto hers, his arms encircling her and holding her completely.

She sighed, once again feeling completely safe and held. Her body opened up again, as if it were melting underneath him and she moved her hips in a rhythm against his, wanting so much to return all the beautiful pleasure he'd given her.

She didn't know how much time had passed but soon he groaned and stopped moving. The warm pulsing of his seed vibrated inside her and he let out a long breath, collapsing in her embrace.

She pressed her lips to his neck. His skin was warm and smooth with a sheen of perspiration from the exertion of lovemaking. She squeezed him tighter in her arms, feeling so sweetly close to him.

They lay together like that for several moments until Jie's breathing calmed to normal. He then rolled onto his side and pulled her against him. The dampness of their bare bodies fused them together. The musky scent of sex from their lovemaking hung in the air.

Meg heaved a deep sigh, feeling contentment for the first time in so long. Jie's arm was around her, his fingers laced through hers. She raised his hand to her lips and kissed it softly.

Jie pressed his lips softly into her shoulder and then pulled her even closer within the warm circle of his embrace. "Sleep well, Megan," he said softly by her ear.

"You too." She smiled to herself and listened to his soft breathing grow steadier.

\* \* \* \* \*

The captain announced their descent into New York.

Schenko's hands tightened on the arms of his seat and he stared blankly at the screen on which a movie had been playing during the flight. He'd barely noticed a thing since their plane had taken off in Moscow. His stomach tightened and again he fought a threatening erection as he thought only of the woman he'd flown nearly halfway across

the world to find. One thing was for certain after all this—he wasn't returning to Russia without her.

Yelin snored obliviously in the seat next to him. Schenko gave his fellow *bodark* a glance and chuckled ruefully. His traveling companion was sleeping quite peacefully for someone who would be killed should he be wrong about his astrological predictions.

Schenko heaved a restive sigh, longing to unfold his huge body from the tiny seat. These airplanes were made for midgets. He hated the lateness of the hour as well. They wouldn't be landing in New York until after nine at night. Then they had to make the connection to Boston. And then they had to find Chinatown. A fellow passenger with whom he'd chatted briefly informed him about how the city of Boston rolled in its sidewalks at night, unlike New York which vibrated with life twenty-four hours a day. In the middle of the night, when they'd be arriving there, everything would be closed and his search couldn't begin until the morning anyway.

He almost cursed Yelin for coming to him with this prediction in the first place. Before then, he had hungered for a mate but since he hadn't found her yet, he'd distracted himself with business and with other women. Somehow, however, knowing that his mate really existed and was within his grasp had roused his slumbering hunger. For Yelin's sake, he'd better be right.

## Chapter Nine

Jie opened his eyes. In the early morning light, the first thing he saw was Megan. Their bodies had moved apart in their sleep but she was facing him, on her side, her body curled in a fetal position. She was sleeping peacefully, her breath rising and falling in a steady rhythm. Errant strands of her silky hair fell across her cheek and her lips were slightly parted as she breathed.

He lay quietly and watched her, resisting the urge to move closer and gather her against him again. She'd told him how her dreams woke her every night and he didn't want to disturb her. She was so pretty and soft, that as he watched her, memories of the night before sent a frisson of heat through his awakening body.

His erection stirred and rose. He wanted her again. Badly. Perhaps it was because he'd gone so long without a woman. But he knew it wasn't only that. He'd been moved by how responsive she was to him, how appreciative and grateful. She was in love with him and he even remembered the moment it had happened. He sensed it seize her and capture her with an almost palpable force. After his experience with Su Lin, who'd grown to hate him because of the things he felt in his heart, Megan's gentle acceptance and unbounded passion were a healing balm to him, body and soul.

He sighed and continued to watch her sleep. In spite of the gentle act of watching her, a frightening sense of darkness gripped him with sudden ferocity. Megan was clearly in danger as long as his rival for her was out there. He wanted nothing more than to get her on a plane and bring her back with him to China. Perhaps out there on the windy prairie, the *lang ren* who also sought her would never find her.

But he knew that wasn't possible. Judging from his own determination and hunger for her, no doubt, the other one felt the same. Jie knew with frightening certainty that he couldn't run and that there was nowhere to hide Megan where she would be safe enough. He would have to allow the *lang ren* to find them. He would have to fight for her, even if it meant taking a life, something that had always been repugnant to him, especially since his parents' murders.

He also knew that for Megan's own safety, he had to tell her the whole truth today.

As carefully as he could, Jie slipped from the bed and used the bathroom. He splashed water on his face and brushed his teeth in anticipation of kissing Megan as soon as she woke up. When he emerged from the bathroom, she was sitting up in the bed, looking around, her pretty face darkened with fear.

As soon as she saw him, however, relief washed over her delicate features and a smile curved her lips. She seemed oblivious to the way the bedclothes bunched around her waist, exposing her full breasts. "Jie," she said softly.

He sensed how badly she wanted him to come back to bed and hold her. She didn't have to worry. Even if he hadn't had an erection painfully tightening his entire lower body, he'd have gone back to the bed and gathered her into his arms. Never before had a woman brought out his protective instincts the way she did. Even though she was strong and self-reliant, he also saw the sweet little girl inside her who craved protection and who loved with unquestioning loyalty. He couldn't help responding to that with every fiber of his being.

"Good morning." He padded back over to the bed and climbed in next to her.

Suddenly, small cries emanated from somewhere else inside the apartment. At first, Jie thought it was a small child somewhere in the building but then recognized the feline sounds.

"That's Mei," Megan said. "She's hungry." She shook her head. "She usually comes in and jumps on the bed to wake me for her breakfast. I don't understand what's gotten into her."

Jie understood. "It's all right. Go ahead and feed her. I'll wait for you right here." He leaned in to her and pressed a tender kiss onto her cheek.

She gazed at him, her eyes brimming with affection. There was also, however, a tentative look in them, as if he might have changed his mind during the night about falling in love with her. He could only think that the experience she'd had with her boyfriend of long ago had made her so fearful of rejection now.

"I'll only be a minute," she said softly.

He watched her slip from the bed, enjoying the pale beauty of her naked body as she pulled a robe from a hook on the bedroom door and slipped into it. He listened to the sounds of her moving around in the kitchen, softly scolding her cat for her strange and inhospitable behavior.

He lay back and stared up at the ceiling. Unfortunately, she would soon understand *precisely* why Mei was afraid of him.

Meg reappeared and came into the bedroom. She slipped off her robe and climbed back under the covers.

He turned to her, moving closer and opened his arms to her.

She practically fell into them, a relieved smile on her face as he enfolded her in his embrace. "Did you sleep all right?" she murmured. Her cheek rested against his chest and one hand held his arm, her fingertips resting lightly on his triceps.

The length of her naked body was pressed to his. Her pubic mound rested directly against his erection and he resisted the overpowering need to turn her onto her back and mount her.

He caressed her cheek and then slid his fingers into her hair. "I did. And you?"

She lifted her face from his chest. The movement brought her naturally onto her back, exposing her fully to his view, lush breasts and all. Her thigh grazed his shaft, causing him to suppress a groan.

"I slept through the night for the first time in six months." Her fingertips slid upward, over the cap of his shoulder and then downward, across his chest.

He wanted her to touch him lower down on his anatomy but instead she raised her hand to his cheek, brushing her fingertips over the light stubble on his chin and jaw. A dreamy look came into her large eyes as her touch grazed his unshaven skin. She seemed enchanted with him, something he never thought a woman would feel for him. Her seeming delight at simply touching him made him fall even more in love with her. God, what would he do if she rejected him after learning the truth? If her life weren't in danger, he had the feeling he would try to hide the truth from her. "I'm glad."

She smiled but her eyes churned with sadness and innocence, the very combination that tore at his heart. "I know it's because you were here," she said softly. "Every morning the same dream comes, just as it does shortly after I fall asleep. But not this morning. I opened my eyes at one point and when I saw you here with me, I was able to go back to sleep."

He stared into her eyes, bracing himself inwardly to tell her the truth. "That is a wonderful thing, *ai ren*. I don't believe I've ever been such a comfort to another person."

"Well, now you are."

Her fingertips slid down his cheek and throat to his chest. Her hand closed lightly over his pectoral muscles, her palm grazing his nipple just enough to ignite him. No touch had ever felt quite like hers, soft and gentle and erotically appreciative all at once. He suppressed a groan, fighting back the fierce tightening in his groin and the wild need to bury his face between her breasts. If he waited another moment, he wouldn't be able to tell her the truth...

He closed his hand over hers, lifting it away from his chest.

Immediately her forehead creased and her eyes clouded. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Did I hurt you?"

He squeezed her hand gently. "Of course not, Megan." He sighed. "It's just that before we..." He hesitated on the words, as if saying them would snap his restraint, "Make love, again, there are important things you must know."

Her hand stiffened in his and her breathing grew audibly louder. Damn, she was already frightened. He swallowed hard, gathering his courage, casting about in his mind for the place to begin. When he found it, he spoke. "I don't know how much your grandfather told you about Li but something he may have mentioned was that Li is an expert astrologist."

Megan nodded. "Yes, he did say that. In fact, he used to say that it was Li who'd told him his destiny was to come to America, to this specific part of the country and that he would meet the woman he would love."

Jie smiled in spite of the gravity of his situation. "Yes, that is my *sifu*." He looked at her again. "He told me the same thing." He paused and gazed into her eyes a moment before speaking. "The truth is, I didn't come here looking for my godfather's friend."

Megan's eyes widened. "You didn't?"

He shook his head. "No. I came here because Li told me that a woman was here for me, the woman who would be my mate."

A flush of color bloomed in her cheeks. "That's what you meant last night about our destiny?"

"Yes."

She smiled. "This is wonderful, then." Her eyes searched his face, obviously wanting him to affirm her statement.

He watched her smile fade when he didn't answer.

"I don't understand, Jie. You don't seem happy about this."

He brought her hand to his lips for a brief but soft kiss into which he poured all his heart and soul. "I couldn't be happier that you're my destiny, Megan," he said softly. "But there are other things...other...forces..." he trailed off, his terror of her rejection mounting.

"Please just say it." Her voice had a pleading tone.

"I'm sorry, Megan. I don't mean to draw it out like this. I'm just...very afraid that you won't be as happy about me when you hear what I have to say."

Megan reached out and cupped his cheek. Her large eyes, which he now knew to be green, gazed at him with the most potent mixture of passion and affection he'd ever seen. "Whatever it is, Jie, we'll work through it. Together." A sweet smile curved her lips. "It's not every day you find your soul mate. When Danny found Dave, it gave me hope for myself. I'm so happy that I wasn't wrong." She looked at him another moment. "I hope that helps."

He nodded, although he prayed she could stand by her words in the moment of truth. "Two years after my divorce," he started, picking his words carefully, "I was very depressed. I missed Su Lin in spite of what had happened between us and I blamed myself for the failure of our marriage. I went to stay with Li, wanting to leave the city and live out on the prairie with him. I still tended to my patients and hoped to establish a practice there.

"Li came to me one night, when I was going to spend the night on the prairie by myself. He warned me that it would be dangerous, that something would happen to me to change my life forever."

He paused and sighed, remembering that moment of disobedience. He'd given Li many moments of distress throughout his adolescence. For several years, Jie had run wild in Beijing, getting involved with bad kids. He still carried a scar on his back from when someone had sliced at him with a broken bottle. A day hadn't passed since then, that he didn't wish he'd heeded his master's many warnings, especially that last one. "I didn't care about danger. I wanted only to be out there under that vast sky, listening to the wind. I thought, 'Whatever happens, I'll accept the consequences'."

He glanced at Megan. Her eyes had widened even further and fear clouded the innocence he usually saw in them. He was glad he hadn't added the fact he'd felt somewhat suicidal.

"What happened?" she urged gently.

Clearing his throat, he gathered his last bit of courage and prepared to finish. "I got up in the middle of the night to relieve myself. The moon was high and full overhead, enabling me to see quite a distance. A creature came loping in my direction, toward where I was camped. As it drew closer, I could see that it looked like a wolf of some kind. I doubted what I was seeing because we don't have wolves in that part of the world. There are snow leopards but not wolves. I thought at the time that perhaps a wolf had made its way to Tibet from Siberia but this was a wolf unlike any I'd ever seen. It was incredibly large and its eyes glowed yellow when it turned its head and caught the moonlight. It was truly like a creature from another universe. Yet here it was, standing a few feet from me, snarling.

"There was nowhere to hide from it. I carried no weapons. The animal was much larger and stronger than I, so I had no way to defend myself. It attacked me."

Megan gasped. "My God! How did you survive?"

He shook his head. "That's the strange thing. The wolf pounced on me, sank its fangs into my arm, then released me. As soon as it had done so, it threw back its head, let out the most eerie sound I've ever heard, something like a human wail and a beast's howl combined, and then ran off into the night." He held out his arm where the skin had never healed correctly from the punctures. "I still have the scar."

Megan looked at his arm. She reached out and gingerly smoothed her fingertips over the damaged skin. "What a horrible experience! You must have been terrified."

He nodded, remembering how that howl had chilled his blood even as he'd grasped his wounded arm in pain. "I was. But the bite was only a small part of my problem. Shortly after that, I lost my ability to see color."

Understanding lit her eyes. "Which was why you asked me about my hair and eyes."

He bowed his head. "Yes. Those were how I identified you as my mate." He looked back up at her and smoothed back her hair. "Golden silk." He touched her cheek. "Smooth ivory." He brushed his thumb along her temple. "Deep jade. Li named these things in the astrological prediction."

"But there's something else, isn't there?" she asked softly. "I see it in your eyes."

He nodded. "Yes, Megan." He sighed, staring into her eyes again. She'd looked at him with more love in the few hours they'd known each other than Su Lin had in years of marriage. Now, he expected that love to turn to scorn as it had with Su Lin. "Aside from the loss of color from my vision, the creature's bite did something inside me. It made me..." he searched wildly for the right words. "Not completely human anymore." He avoided her gaze. "My beautiful Megan, the bite I received turned me into a *lang ren*. A werewolf."

The gasp she released made his heart fall in misery.

## Chapter Ten

*Werewolf.*

Megan's vision blurred, her eyes registering only the morning light through the window.

*Do not fear the werewolf's kiss.*

*My dream.*

She didn't realize she'd said the words out loud until Jie spoke to her.

"Megan? What are you saying?"

His voice pulled her into the present. She blinked several times, concentrating on focusing. When she saw Jie clearly again, her gaze registered the lines of distress around his almond eyes.

"My dream," she repeated. Her strength of mind seeped back in, making her understand the urgent need to speak. "Grandfather. When he comes to me in my dreams, he always says the same thing. 'Do not fear the werewolf's kiss'." She blinked again, no longer confused by the words.

Yet, the implication was larger than anything she could ever have imagined. Even more astounding, heart-wrenching, otherworldly, than even an astrological prediction. This could only be...magical.

She looked at him. "How can this..." She trailed off, her words captured by her deepening shock. The connection between her dream and Jie's revelation seemed to dig deeper into her soul than his revelation itself. "Jie? Is that really possible? Can you really turn into a..."

"Wolf," he finished for her. He bowed his head. "Yes, Megan. It happens to me just like in the movies. When the moon is full, I change, whether I want to or not."

When he looked back up at her, his eyes were glistening and she detected the slightest trembling in his lower lip. Her deepest instincts told her he was afraid she'd reject him. She returned his gaze, looking deep into those brown eyes, then at the face of this man who'd given her so much love and comfort in only a few hours. She could never find it in her heart to reject him because of something that had happened beyond his control. He'd already suffered enough. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

His face fell and he looked down, away from her. "Sorry you were with me?"

She put her fingertips under his chin, bidding him to look up again. "No." Her answer was soft yet firm. "Absolutely not. I'm sorry you've suffered so much."

His eyes widened, lit by what appeared to be a spark of hope. "Do you mean you don't hate me because of this?"

"Hate you? How could I? You're a wonderful man. Besides, I know a thing or two about intolerance. I've suffered a great deal from it as did my family. My father's parents disowned him when he married my mother." The darkness of resentment closed in on her, the way it always did when she thought of the cruel way her other grandparents had treated their own son. "I couldn't possibly behave the same way, even if I didn't love you."

Jie closed his hand over hers and brought it to his lips. The brown color of his eyes glowed with unshed tears. "Megan, thank you."

She looked at him a moment before speaking. His gratitude that she hadn't rejected him only showed her even more how great his suffering had been. "I'm the one who should be thanking you, Jie," she said softly. She reached out with her other hand and caressed his hair, loving the feel of its smoothness against her fingertips. "I had no idea such creatures actually existed." The ease with which she accepted the existence of werewolves surprised her.

Jie nodded. "Nor did I. But they do."

"How many are there? Are they everywhere?" Her mind began to scan her memory of the many people she'd met over the years. Was it possible that any of these people had been a *lang ren*?

His face fell and a sheepish look stole into his beautiful almond eyes. "To my shame, I don't have any answers. When I realized the truth of what had happened to me, I ran into the shelter of Li's home and hid there. I did not question or try to learn anything about lycanthropy." He paused and heaved a deep sigh. "For quite a while, I was able to use *tai chi* practice to keep the change at bay. Increasing the flow of my *chi* gave me the energy necessary to stay in human form. However, this last moon, it didn't work. The beast is stronger now, beyond my control. And I don't understand why."

He took a deep breath and squeezed her hand. Something in the tiny gesture made her know there was even more he had to tell her.

"I know only of one other *lang ren*, Megan," he went on.

Her heart squeezed in her chest. She'd been right.

"Li found him on the same astrological chart that told him I had a mate. Li urged me to go and find you as soon as possible...before the other one did."

The darkness that slid into his tone and over his handsome features made Megan's stomach tighten.

"Who is this other *lang ren*?" she asked, her voice falling to a whisper. "Do you know him?"

He shook his head. "No. I've never met him but Li said he is searching for you, that he's bad and that I must protect you." His jaw tightened and his eyes blazed with sudden ferocity. "Which I will, Megan. To my last breath."

Meg's vision blurred again and her heart pumped icy spurts of blood through her veins. The skin of her entire body felt as if it were being pricked by a shower of tiny

pins. "Jie, is he here? Is he...coming here?" The words spilled from her, sounding like nonsense to her own ears. But she wasn't certain of the appropriate response upon learning that an evil werewolf was coming to steal her away.

"I'm certain he will come looking for you. Thankfully, I got here first. I'll fight him to the death if I have to."

The words *fight to the death* catapulted her from her frightened haze. She threw herself at Jie, squeezing him in her arms. "No!" She buried her face against his neck. "You mustn't do that!"

Jie's hands closed around her arms and he held her away from him, gently but firmly. "I must. Otherwise, he'll find a way eventually to kill me and take you." His gaze simmered into hers, conveying to her the fierce protectiveness he'd already expressed in words. "I swear to you I'll protect you, Meg."

The longer she stared back at him, the calmer she grew. She felt herself being enveloped in the liquid brown depths of his eyes, as if he'd put a spell on her. As long as she focused on him, she felt completely safe. Slowly, she nodded. "I know," she whispered.

Gently, he pulled her toward him again. "That's right, my love." He brushed his lips across hers, softly at first, then again, more firmly, parting the seam of her lips with his seeking tongue. His hands slid from her arms around her back, his palms splayed on her skin, cradling her in a possessive embrace.

With their lips still locked in a kiss, Jie lay back, bringing Megan to lie on top of him. Her breasts brushed his chest with erotic promise. His tongue stroked hers with moist warmth and she could feel the deep possession he was taking of her, as if he could make their souls into one simply through a kiss.

He pulled his mouth from hers and looked up at her from under heavy lids. "Take my yang fire, *ai ren*. I give it to you feely. It will infuse you with courage." He laced the fingers of one hand into her hair and tenderly drew her face to his for another deep kiss. His other hand stroked her back and smoothed down her waist over her buttocks. He squeezed one cheek softly and then moved his touch around her thigh, running his fingertips along her slit.

His feathery touch made her moan and without thinking, she rose up on her hands and straddled him, her body hot, longing only to have him inside her, to forget the world outside, the danger awaiting them and the grief that had plagued her for so long. Just for a little while.

"Yes, Meg," he breathed, reaching down to hold his erection in place for her.

In one swift motion, she impaled herself on his hard shaft. The friction of his cock inside her, spreading her open, filling her, became her entire world. The sounds of his harsh breathing and his soft moan as their bodies joined filled her entire mind. In all the world, there was only Jie, her hands on his warm smooth skin, her fingertips pressing on his slim hips, anchoring her body across his.

She started to ride up and down on his thick erection, slowly at first, then with increasing fervor. Her movements formed a rhythm, sliding up almost to the head of his cock and falling back down.

Jie's hands closed around her hips. "Slower, my love," he whispered, "Take your pleasure."

She obeyed, pressing her hands into the mattress on either side of him and sitting astride, bucking against him as if she were riding a horse. The friction against her clit was maddeningly delicious and her eyes fluttered closed in response and she tilted her head back, feeling her hair falling around her breasts. "Jie," she whispered, loving the sound of his name in her ears. "Jie."

His hands tightened on her buttocks, urging her forward. "Come up here, Meg," he rasped. "I want to eat you again."

Obediently, she moved carefully up on the mattress until she straddled his face. With hands anchored on her hips, he pulled her open pussy down onto his mouth.

She let out a small gasp of pleasure as his tongue pressed on her already swollen clit and moved around the aching bud in tiny quick circles, sending waves of erotic heat through her loins.

She supported her weight by holding on to the headboard of the bed. Her breasts rubbed lightly against the wood, making her nipples tingle pleasantly, heightened by the delicious sensations from Jie's mouth. His loving was unlike anything she'd ever experienced and all her thoughts and fears melted away as he pleased her.

"Mm," he murmured in his throat, his hands squeezing her tightly against his hungry mouth. He took her entire clit between his lips and tugged it gently but firmly.

She gasped and moaned. Each tiny tug sent her body careening closer to release. On the fourth tug of her clit, she went over the edge. Gripping the headboard, she braced herself against the intense waves of orgasm, for fear she would lose all control and crush Jie's face.

As he'd done before, he milked her orgasm of every nuance of sensation it could give her and didn't stop licking back and forth over her clit until her body went limp, barely supporting herself on her knees.

Before she could do anything else, Jie's strong hands were guiding her, laying her down onto her back. Then he rose up over her, settling between her parted legs. His lips and chin glistened from her juices and his eyes were wild and dark with need. In one swift motion, he sheathed his cock deep inside her, taking her mouth at the same time, fusing his musk-dampened mouth with hers.

Her own scent filled her nostrils, mingling with Jie's masculine scent. She closed her eyes, returning his kiss with every bit of love and passion she had inside her, her body melted open giving all of herself to him. Her sex was wet and open and she bucked her hips against his, squeezing her muscles around his shaft in her desire to give him pleasure.

He pulled his mouth from hers and bent his head down to her breast, sucking fervently on her nipple while he moved inside her.

She squeezed hard, tightening her vaginal muscles around his cock.

He groaned and lifted his face from her breast, his eyes closed. "Meg," he rasped, moving faster and harder, increasing his rhythm until he let out a long soft groan, the warmth of his seed pulsing inside her.

She caressed the damp muscles of his back while he rested in her arms, breathing heavily. "I love you, Jie," she whispered. She hoped she wasn't wrong to say it but the statement felt like the most natural thing in the world to say.

He lifted his face and gazed down at her. "I love you too, Meg." He kissed her softly. "Together, we're strong enough to face anything, no matter how frightening, yes?"

She looked up at him, watching the dark determination infusing his expression. Wordlessly, she nodded, knowing exactly what he'd meant.

## Chapter Eleven

Yelin stopped on the corner of an intersection. He took out a handkerchief and mopped beads of sweat off his brow. They'd arrived in Chinatown early this morning and Schenko had divided their group into pairs, sending him off with his henchman, Yuri. Together, they'd canvassed half of the neighborhood called Chinatown but not all the stores had opened yet.

Yelin glanced sideways at his fellow *bodark*, wishing he could be free of him if even for five minutes. The giant goon trailed him, never letting him get more than a couple of feet away from him.

Schenko obviously didn't trust him. And with good reason. But not for the reasons Schenko believed. Yelin's lip curled in a private grin, remembering Schenko's restlessness during the flight and in the hotel room. Perhaps it was cruel of him to make the alpha suffer this way but he couldn't help himself. Lilya was dead because of that bastard. She'd loved him and he used her and threw her away like a tea bag. The police had declared her death a suicide. Technically, perhaps, it was.

But to Yelin, it was as good as murder. Lilya had shot herself but as far as Yelin was concerned, Schenko had pulled the trigger when he'd told her he didn't want her around him anymore.

Schenko had killed his beautiful sister. And he was going to pay.

Across the street, one of the stores that had been closed was now getting ready to open. A Chinese man had propped open the front door and was pushing a produce cart out onto the sidewalk. As soon as the man emerged, a scent carried to Yelin's nose through the humid summer air. The scent was familiar as his own, the musky, feral scent of a *bodark*.

Yelin's gut tightened. He glanced at the sign on the place. *Chen's Market*. He looked at Yuri. The beta too, was sniffing the air, turning toward him. When they were facing each other, Yuri looked down at him, his eyes hidden behind dark glasses. The goon nodded his head.

Yelin watched the Chinese man a moment longer. His back was to Yelin as he pushed the cart up against the window. However, in the next moment he froze, as if aware of being watched. Slowly he turned and scanned the awakening activity on the street before him. He looked down in one direction, following the line of stores on the street opposite him. As soon as he reached the spot where Yelin stood next to Yuri, he stopped.

He looked no further. The man stood staring at him, a muscle in his jaw tensing visibly. Another second later, he turned and went back inside.

Yelin suppressed a gleeful grin. Perhaps this *bodark* wasn't the one fated to kill Schenko but the chances were still very good. His charts had told him that his opponent would come from a place in China on the plains by what was once Tibet. He'd double checked his information, his research revealing that although there weren't wolves in Tibet, there were individual *bodarks*, lone werewolves who wandered the entire continent of Asia, so certainly this Chinese man could be one of them. In addition, the charts were very accurate, usually to the square foot. But Yuri didn't have to know that. And neither did Schenko.

He looked up at Yuri. "Let's go."

Yuri nodded and stepped off the curb. Together, they waited for a bus to pass by and then started across the street toward Chen's Market.

The place where Yelin hoped to find smooth ivory, deep jade and golden silk.

His shot at taking over Schenko's pack and ridding the world of the *bodark* he hated depended on it.

Jie watched them through the window. The two *lang ren* were almost across the street. Their gazes were trained right on the store and in another few moments, they'd be inside. One of them was huge with a broad chest and stone-like expression. He towered over his companion, who was short and wiry, with shoulder-length stringy hair and several days' growth of beard. The mere thought that either of these men would touch Meg made his bile rise. He'd kill both of them before letting them near her.

Meg stood beside him. He sensed her tension worsen as they reached the sidewalk in front of the store. She pressed closer to him, slipping her hand into his.

His question of how he'd know another *lang ren* when he encountered one had been answered within moments of wheeling the cart out onto the sidewalk. The animal scent, a distinct glandular odor unlike any other he'd ever smelled, had assaulted his nostrils. Then he'd felt their presence, sensed their gazes almost boring into his back. When he'd turned and seen them, he knew beyond any doubt what they were.

"Don't worry," he murmured, his tone belying the vicious tightening in his gut. "They won't do anything out in the open like this. He wasn't sure how he knew that but his deepest instincts told him so.

The shorter one pushed open the front door, letting in a gust of animal smell. Detectable only to Jie, the odor of *lang ren* permeated the air, mingling with the other smells already in the small market. He moved his stance so that he more than half covered Meg from their direct view. The large hulky *lang ren* followed close on the heels of the short one, giving Jie the sense that he was either guarding him or policing his movements in some way.

Jie squared his shoulders, wondering if his heartbeat was audible to them, the way it was crashing around in his chest. "May I help you?" he asked, keeping his tone flat and distinctly less than hospitable.

The taller *lang ren* remained silent, standing like a tower of rock behind the other one. The short greasy *lang ren* smiled, baring a set of yellowed broken teeth. "I certainly hope so." He spoke with a thick accent that Jie recognized. Russia. He remembered the lilts and tones of this accent from the time he'd spent in Moscow. He had also managed to learn enough of the language to get around quite well. He chose, however, not to reveal this knowledge.

"I am seeking something...someone, rather, who possesses, perhaps sells jade, ivory and silk. Gold silk to be precise."

Jie heard the tiniest catch in Meg's breath and prayed the other two hadn't caught it. Unfortunately, the dark eyes of the *lang ren* who'd spoken slid past Jie and regarded Meg.

"Do you have any of these things I seek?"

Jie narrowed his eyes. "No. We sell mostly perishables here. You will have to look in a different place. We apologize for the inconvenience."

Suddenly, the bell on the door tinkled again. Jie looked up and saw two men coming in. Immediately, he recognized Meg's friend Danny Wong, the young man in the photographs upstairs. Even though Danny had since filled out and lost his gawkiness, there was no mistaking him. The man following close behind Danny Jie recognized as Danny's lover, David.

Danny's gaze flickered over the group standing there and the smile he wore at seeing Meg faded. He came to a standstill and David, at his side, seemed to take the cue. Both men appeared sensitive to the tension radiating in the air.

The short *lang ren* also turned and watched Danny and David come to a standstill. He turned back to Jie with the same falsely charming smile as before. "Excuse our intrusion. We will go elsewhere." He passed another look over Meg and then turned. The tall *lang ren* followed him without a word.

When they reached the door, Jie caught bits and pieces of their verbal exchange in Russian. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck. From what little he could gather, they were planning to return later and were interested in having another look at the *dyevooshka*, the girl.

Meg barely registered Danny and Dave's arrival. Her heart was galloping at least sixty miles an hour and her body trembled so badly she was certain she'd have fallen down if it weren't for Jie's strong form supporting her.

As soon as the two Russians left, she sagged against Jie, gripping his shoulder. "Jie," she whispered, her throat constricted from her terror. The way that skinny, greasy-looking *lang ren* had perused her. Could it be humanly possible he was the one coming to claim her? Oh, God...

Jie's arms came up around her as she sagged.

"Meg!"

The voice who said her name in distress wasn't Jie but Danny. She stared blankly at his face, furrowed in concern as he rushed toward her. When he reached them, Jie released Meg and held one of her arms, letting Danny take her other one.

"Come, sweetheart, sit down," Jie said softly. He and Danny guided her over to the table. He lowered her into a chair, smoothing back her hair with a gentle hand before kneeling in front of her, his hands on her thighs.

When she was seated, Danny went over to the urn and poured a cup of tea, which he brought to the table and set in front of her. With his hands on the table, he leaned over, being noticeably careful not to crowd her. "Meg?" The deep concern in his gentle tenor voice began to reel her back in from the horrifying fear she'd experienced in the previous moments.

Jie's hands on her knees, his strong presence and Danny's comforting friendship nearby began to ease her shock. For the first time in minutes, she was able to look up at Danny and smile a bit the way she usually smiled when she saw her dear friend. "Hi, Danny."

He heaved a sigh of relief. "Meg, I've never seen you like that."

She nodded. "I've never quite been that way before."

Jie reached for the teacup and lifted it. "Can you take a sip?"

"I think so." She took the small white cup from him and let a small swallow of tea slide into her mouth. The liquid was warm and soothing, something she'd drunk every day since childhood. She took one more sip before setting the cup down.

She looked up at Danny again. "I'm sorry, Danny. I so much wanted you and Jie to meet but not like this."

Danny came around the table to her side and put his arms around her. "It's all right." When he released her, she gestured to the man she'd fallen in love with. "Danny, this is Jie. Jie, Danny, my best friend." She looked up and saw Dave standing at the windows, his body tensed, obviously scanning the street outside for their two visitors.

Jie offered his hand to Danny and they shook hands. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Danny."

"And that's Dave over there."

At the mention of his name, Dave turned and walked over to them, his expression showing he was still thinking about the two strangers. He held out his hand to Jie. "Dave Pearce."

"Jie Sing."

"Pleased to meet you." He looked at Meg. "Perhaps you want to lock the front doors for a while?"

Meg blinked, unable to make any kind of decision. She looked at Jie who shook his head. "No. We mustn't do that. We must not appear to the outside as if anything out of the ordinary is going on." Gently he clasped her shoulder. "You should go sit in the office for a few minutes. I'll watch things out here, okay?"

"I'll go with her," Danny said.

"And I'll stay out here and watch the street," Dave added.

Jie nodded and gave her shoulder a soft squeeze. His mere touch infused her with enough strength to rise from her chair. "Meg, you have very good friends."

She managed a weak smile. "Yes, I know. I'm very lucky." She looked directly into Jie's eyes so that he'd realize she also referred to him.

The light that infused his solemn expression showed her that he'd understood.

She picked up her teacup and headed toward the back of the store where the little office was. She opened the door and Danny followed her in, leaving the door slightly ajar. She sank into the desk chair and Danny sat down in the second chair across from her.

He looked at her for a minute and she felt him studying her, whenever he wasn't sure exactly what to say. "Are you all right, Meggie?" The same concern weighed in his voice.

She managed a brief nod even though she wasn't sure she was all right. "I am. I know it's only been since Thursday night that I saw you but so much has happened since then. My entire life has changed. In just a few hours!"

Danny nodded. "Yes, I know how that goes." He looked at her. "Are you and this man...you know...involved?"

A flush of warmth suddenly caused her skin to tingle and she smiled in spite of how shaken she still was. "Yes. You remember that friend of Grandfather's, the one he used to say told him his destiny was to come to America?"

"The astrologer? The man in the photograph, right?"

"Yes. Li. Jie is his godson."

Danny raised his eyebrows. "Wow, that's amazing! Did he come looking for your grandfather?"

"I thought he had. But it turns out he was looking for me. Li told him his destiny was here." She leaned forward. "Danny, he came all the way from China to find *me*! Can you believe it?" She shook her head, the implications hitting her as if she hadn't realized them before. "I could never have imagined such a thing."

Danny's eyes widened and reached over and covered Meg's hand with his own. "Meggie, why wouldn't someone travel so far for you? You're the best."

She looked down at the surface of the desk, the blotter on which she'd scribbled all kinds of notes in Chinese about shipments and class schedules and doodly pictures of Mei. She couldn't help smiling. "I still can't believe it. He certainly is wonderful." She smiled sheepishly. "And gorgeous."

"I noticed." Danny squeezed her hand. "Meg, I'm so happy for you. All those times we talked about finding our soul mates and now it's happened."

Before she realized what was happening, hot tears pooled in her eyes. She blinked them back. She ached for the situation to be that simple, that gloriously sweet. After all

the pain in her life, after losing Lao Ye, how wonderful it would have been simply to take comfort in the love and sensuality her life had just presented to her. She heaved a deep sigh. "Yes, he is my soul mate and I'm grateful."

"I think I hear a *but* in there somewhere."

She nodded. This was where it got dicey. How could she possibly tell Danny that Jie was a...werewolf? The task seemed impossible and yet, considering the situation, it was probably better for her friend's safety if he understood the truth. "Yes. There is a big but, no pun intended." She paused and leaned forward. "Danny, I have to tell you something and you have to swear, as my friend, that you'll believe me and not think I'm crazy. Will you swear?"

Danny looked at her, his large brown eyes concerned but he nodded. "Of course, Meggie. I love you. I know you're not crazy."

She took a deep breath and told him the story of Jie's experience as he'd related it to her. When she finished, she watched Danny's face carefully for his reaction. During her recitation, the expression on his smooth features and in his dark eyes had gone from astonishment to menacing darkness when she'd reached the part about the dangerous *lang ren* who was searching for her.

"Danny, you don't think I'm crazy or that Jie is crazy, do you?" She hated the mere thought that he might. She needed her friend's support so very badly.

To her great relief, he shook his head without hesitation. "Of course not. In fact, Dave saw one once."

She stared at him. "You mean...a...*lang ren*?"

"Yes. I didn't tell you before because, well, you didn't know him that well yet and it's not exactly something you just drop on someone by the way, you know?"

She nodded. "I understand. Did he tell you the details?"

"Yes. Well you know how after his first partner John died and Dave left the force?"

Meg nodded. Dave had told her his heartbreaking story about his first lover. "Yes, I remember."

"Well, during that long trip out west that he took, he was camping in Colorado and met a woman. She was the only other person in the whole campground, so they decided to share a site and do the cooking together and just keep each other company. Well, in the middle of the night, something woke him up in his sleep. He poked his head out of his tent and saw her standing in the middle of the campsite, pulling off her clothing. He thought it was really weird and then as he watched, she changed, right there in front of his eyes. She was human one minute and the next, she looked like a wolf."

Meg gasped. "Did she hurt him?"

"No. She just went running off into the night, disappearing in the woods."

"What did Dave do?"

Danny grinned in spite of the gravity of the situation. "He broke camp, packed up his gear, threw it in the car and took off. He didn't even put his clothes on."

She found herself grinning also. "Poor guy. That must have been frightening."

Danny looked down, his smile fading. "Yeah, to say the least. He was terrified."

His tension filled the office and her grin also went away. "I'm scared, Danny."

He looked back up at her. "I'm here for you, Meggie. So's Dave. He's grown to love you too."

Her tears pooled again. This time, she was unable to repress them. Her fear was for Jie as much as for herself. He'd basically told her he was going to fight the other *lang ren* to the death. "Jie has sworn to protect me but I don't see how..." she trailed off, not wanting to think about it.

"We'll do whatever we can to help."

Danny's quiet assurance gave her some comfort. But she knew she wouldn't have a moment's peace until this was all over and Jie was still alive.

## Chapter Twelve

*"I would rather maim than kill  
Hurt than maim  
Intimidate than hurt  
Avoid than intimidate."  
— Poem from a Shaolin Temple*

Yelin seated himself at the corner table Schenko and Igor already occupied in the crowded restaurant. It was just getting to be lunchtime and the close atmosphere of the restaurant swarmed with tourists and those who were obviously residents of the neighborhood. Yelin's canine sense of smell picked up the scent of human sweat mingled with the smells of cooking meat and the smoke of Schenko's cigarette. The noises of conversation in various Chinese dialects, English and other unidentifiable languages around them swarmed in his ears.

Yelin barely noticed any of it, concentrating his attention solely on Schenko's tight features and the frenetic drags he took on his cigarette.

The cold slate blue eyes came to rest on him. "Well? We searched this shit hole all morning and nothing."

Yelin returned his look, his already perspiring body flush with the satisfaction of victory. *Let him squirm a bit longer.* He drummed his fingers on the table and gave his order for Mongolian beef to the waiter who approached the table. When the waiter had gone, he made a show of pulling his own pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and leaning over to Yuri for a light. How wonderful it felt to have the upper hand with this murdering bastard! "I may have found her," he said on an exhalation of smoke sent in Schenko's direction.

Schenko rose from his seat. "Are you playing some sort of game with me, you little prick?" His voice was a hoarse growl and his square jaw flexed with tension.

Yelin tapped out his ashes into an empty teacup. "Sit down, sir. I'm not playing any sort of game with you." He took another leisurely drag, suppressing his grin. "I may have found her. But if I come in here all excited and send you running out there to check her out, you'll only bring attention to yourself and cause trouble. We must go about this *intelligently*. Just because she is yours, technically speaking, doesn't mean you can just grab her." He grinned inwardly.

All along, he'd left the relevant details of the situation out of his narratives to Schenko, not the least of which was that the chart he'd done actually was his *own* chart, not Schenko's. The woman in the prediction was actually for him, Yelin, and the fight was his own to endure. Truthfully, he would have much preferred mating with the

Chinese *bodark* who'd gotten to the woman first. Incredibly handsome and strong, that one.

But in the end, he didn't want sex with men or women. The Chinese *bodark* could have the girl for all he cared. All Yelin wanted was revenge.

His answer seemed to satisfy Schenko for the moment and the large alpha lowered himself stiffly into his chair again. He looked at Yuri. "Did you see her?"

Yuri nodded in his usual perfunctory manner.

Schenko's fist tightened and he was visibly restraining himself from pounding on the table. "Both of you are withholding from me. I want an answer now!"

Yelin took one more puff on his cigarette and poured himself some tea from the pot on the table. He was enjoying this too much to hurry it along. "She's beautiful. But as I say, I am not certain it is she. We have not found the jade, ivory and golden silk, none of which was to be found in the store where she was."

Schenko opened his mouth to speak but Yelin held up a hand.

"However," he went on in as condescending a tone as he could muster. "As you know, betas can see in color and I can tell you now that golden silk could very well refer to her hair, blonde as it is. And her eyes, well, if they are not the color of deep jade, I don't know what is."

Schenko's lip curled in a satisfied grin. "Well, comrade, you are more intelligent than I gave you credit for. Perhaps you will succeed with me after all."

Yelin nodded, feeling more like a smug feline than a canine. Now was the time to put the screw to him. "One more thing, however, sir. There was a *bodark* in the store with her. The first one we've encountered since we arrived. I did not scent any more besides him but he did seem *protective* of her, as if he'd been expecting us."

Schenko's skin darkened, the flush of anger visible even in the shadowy light of the restaurant. "I'll take care of him," he muttered. "I want to see her as soon as we leave here."

Yelin took a swallow of tea and then another leisurely puff on his cigarette. "Of course. That was exactly my intention."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jie explained the situation to Danny and Dave. They, in turn, offered to watch the store for Meg so that Jie could take her into the studio where he could help her collect herself. She stood quietly where he'd left her in the middle of the room while he lowered the shades over the large windows.

In the quiet of the shadowy light, he went back over to her and stood in front of her. Her fear radiated through her body into his hands and the scent of it filled the room. Her need called on that protective strength he'd found inside himself since he'd met her. In spite of the inner strength she possessed, he knew she found herself in a

situation that was beyond anything she'd ever known about and did not yet have a way to meet it.

He squeezed her shoulders gently, feeling more tenderness toward her than he ever thought he could feel with any one human being, including his patients. "Meg," he said softly.

She looked up at him. "What?"

"Come, do the Yang Short sequence with me. It will help keep you centered." He brushed his thumbs across the silky white shirt covering her shoulders. "All right?"

"Yes."

He smiled at her and lowered his face to hers for a brief kiss. Then he took a place at her side and they began the preparation step, breathing deeply and lowering their stance into the *wu chi* position.

Meg watched their reflections as they moved, their bodies flowing from one stance to the next like water. As Jie had said, focusing her attention on the moving meditation centered her and helped her feel a deeper strength beyond her fear, a well of strength that emanated from her being.

As soon as they'd finished and returned to the beginning stance, Meg looked up and saw Danny's reflection in the mirror. He was standing in the doorway that led into the market, watching them. Something in his expression made her freeze. Rarely did the dusky gold tint of his skin ever look pale. Now it did. "Meg," he said softly, "They're back."

Her blood ran cold and she looked at Jie. His face had darkened and the muscle in his jaw was working. He reached for her hand and squeezed it.

"I should hide," she whispered.

"There's no use in that, Meg. If he is able to detect your scent as I do, then he already knows you're here. Nothing will happen to you while I'm at your side. I promise."

## Chapter Thirteen

*The handbook of the strategist has said:  
"Do not invite the fight, accept it instead,  
"Better a foot behind than an inch too far ahead,"  
Which means –  
Look a man straight in the face and make no move,  
Roll up your sleeve and clench no fist,  
Open your hand and show no weapon,  
Bare your breast and find no foe.  
But as long as there be a foe, value him,  
Respect him, measure him, be humble toward him;  
Let him not strip from you, however strong he be,  
Compassion, the one wealth which can afford him.  
—Lao Tzu*

The words of the sage rose in Jie's mind as he put his arm across Megan's shoulders and walked toward the doorway where Danny stood. The *lang rens* were back and it was obvious to everyone involved that Meg was the woman they were looking for. From the moment they'd walked in earlier, the tension of knowledge ran in an invisible undercurrent between them. The elusive words of *deep jade, smooth ivory* and *golden silk* had taken on their precise meaning once they'd picked up his scent. They knew he was one of them and they knew he'd reached her first.

Finally, after all these years, he understood. In one moment, everything Li had been trying to teach him, pushing him to make sure he performed his meditation each day, that he absorbed the meaning of the *Tao* into his very blood, made sense.

Since Jie's boyhood, Li had urged him to retain his humanity in the face of violence and hatred. Like seeds that had been planted inside him, the knowledge rose like an abundant harvest in the moment he needed it the most. He bowed deeply to Li inside his heart, praying he would see his dear friend and godfather soon and thank him in person.

Danny stood aside when Jie and Meg reached the doorway and Jie saw her friend take her hand protectively as they passed through.

The same two *lang rens* who had come in earlier stood in front of the cash register. Only now, they were joined by two others, equally as huge as the goon-like one who'd

stood motionless and wordless behind the skinny gap-toothed *lang ren* who'd done all the talking.

Although Jie's heart pounded fiercely, his long habit of affecting a calm demeanor fell into place like a familiar shroud. "May I help you?" His voice sounded distant to his ears.

This time, one of the new werewolves, one with hair as light as Meg's and eyes that practically glittered with unsated hunger stepped forward. His large frame exuded tension and Jie could feel the currents of restrained power sparking off his giant, obviously muscular body.

Before he spoke, however, the bells on the door tinkled. Everyone turned in unison to see a young Chinese woman with a young boy enter the store.

"Why don't we talk in the studio?" Jie suggested.

The tall *lang ren* nodded. "Good idea."

Jie noticed he spoke with the same thick Russian accent as the skinny one.

Meg's hand closed around his arm. If she'd spoken out loud, she couldn't have conveyed the message of *don't leave me* more clearly. He looked at her. "Come with me," he said softly to her in Mandarin.

She nodded and moved at his side back into the studio.

Leaving Danny and Dave in the store to help the customer, Jie closed the door behind them and they came to stand in the center of the small studio, Meg pressing close against his side. The scent of her fear filled the room. Unfortunately, however, he wasn't the only one who could smell it.

"I think you know why we're here," the large one said. Jie realized then that the group of them must be from a pack and the one who spoke was the alpha.

Jie folded his arms across his chest. "I am not quite certain. Perhaps you can spell it out."

The Russian suppressed a scowl. He was obviously someone used to getting his way and brooked no opposition. He pointed to Meg. "The girl." He looked at her, his eyes widening with a look of greed.

Jie's gut tightened. He detested the way this *lang ren* stared at Meg as if she were a piece of meat. He had to work very hard to remember the teaching about showing compassion to one's foe. There was no point in pretending. If he tried to hedge cautiously, he risked igniting his opponent's ire.

"It did not take me long to realize that jade, ivory and golden silk were not items that the woman was to present to me but her own physical qualities," he went on before Jie could answer. "Apparently, you also figured out the riddle." He pointed to the short greasy-haired *lang ren*. "My colleague here is not colorblind. Perhaps you are a beta, like him, natural born, retaining your ability to see colors." He took a menacing step toward Jie.

Instinctively, Jie stepped in front of Meg, putting himself between her and the aggressive *lang ren*.

The Russian chuckled. "Or, perhaps you are an alpha, like myself, bitten, created by another. We see in black and white, like true dogs." His voice remained low and controlled, a constant growl, like a threat. "A fight between two alphas is more than a fight," he went on. "It's a masterpiece of violence in which only one emerges the winner." He paused, his gaze perusing Jie from head to foot, obviously sizing him up as an opponent. "Even though you don't answer, I can see you're an alpha. Nature would not be so unjust to me as to pit me against a weaker foe." He shot a glance at Meg. "Let her know that the victor will have earned her."

Jie stared at him, searching his mind for his next words. Behind him, Meg released a small whimper. Her terror radiated through him. The mere thought that this *lang ren* wanted to *touch* his woman started a fist of anger tightening in the depths of his gut. "I do not wish for violence," he forced himself to say.

The *lang ren's* lip curled in a snarling grin. "Violence can be avoided...that is...if you are willing to give her up to me without a fight." He took a step toward them.

In a reflex, Jie stepped closer to Meg.

The Russian stopped and glared at him. "Otherwise, there is no alternative. Two alphas cannot occupy the same woman at the same time." He chuckled at his pseudo-clever words.

Jie heard Meg swallow another tiny whimper in her throat. She was being incredibly brave, despite her fear and he admired her, even in the midst of this threat.

The Russian's gaze flickered to her and his lip curled upward in a grin.

Jie stepped toward him, his hands raised in an on-guard position. "All right. Let's do this now."

The Russian stared at him a moment, his light-colored eyes now glittering with amusement. He laughed, a loud hearty sound that rumbled from deep within his belly. The laughter echoed through the studio, ringing with a derisive tone clearly meant to humiliate Jie and make light of him as an opponent.

Jie felt the beginnings of his anger unfurl from the cavern of his soul. The cruelty in his opponent reminded him of so many of the bureaucratic officials in China whom he'd come across in the wake of his parents' death, automatons to whom true justice meant nothing. The greedy bastards whom Lao Tzu had called "laughers" at the true way of life. "I'm sorry, I don't see the humor." He did not relax his on-guard stance as he spoke.

The *lang ren* ceased his laughter but the deprecating humor still sparkled through his eyes. "We cannot fight to the death in human form," he said. "We die only as *bodark*."

Jie's muscles remained tensed to fight but the werewolf's statement stabbed through him like slivers of cold steel. He looked at the skinny *lang ren*.

"It's true," the smaller one answered, "Whether you got the bite or whether you are *bodark* born."

Meg let out a soft cry. "Jie, no!" she breathed in Chinese, her voice trembling with a violence that sliced through his heart.

He glanced at her, then back at his rival, never letting his on-guard stance down. "Then you can't have your fight," he muttered through clenched teeth, "Not until the next full moon."

The Russian laughed again. If he was trying to annoy Jie to death, he probably had a chance at success, even in human form. "What are you talking about, *bodark*? This is not the movies. You can change whenever you want to."

Again, almost as a reflex, Jie glanced at the skinny one.

He nodded, his large grin showing yellowed teeth, some cracked, others missing. "This is also true. Perhaps you are new and don't know yourself so well. You can change right this second if you wish."

Jie looked hard at him then at his opponent. "How?"

To his great irritation, the colossal, presumably blond *lang ren* began to laugh again, his obnoxious, derisive guffaws bouncing off the walls of the studio. His laughter continuing, he began to unbutton his starched white shirt, tossing it to the floor when he'd removed it. He lifted off his undershirt, revealing a torso of chiseled, rippling muscle.

Jie watched him, his hands curling into tight fists, his body tense, ready to spring in defense, if necessary. He glanced at Meg, whose gaze bounced between him and the Russian, who'd by now nearly divested himself of every stitch of clothing.

He'd pulled off his shoes and socks and now stood in a pair of briefs. He looked over at the two other large *lang ren*s. "Perhaps our friend here needs a jump start for his change," he said, his voice full of cruel-edged amusement. "Give him what he needs." No sooner had he issued his command than he stood still, every muscle of his body tensing, the cords of his muscles tightening beyond what seemed humanly possible.

In the next moment, he slid into what appeared to be the change, his body morphing rapidly into the transition from human to *lang ren* in an accelerated version of what Jie had experienced.

Meg screamed.

"Meg!" Danny yelled from inside the store.

"Stay back!" Jie ordered when both Danny and Dave crowded the doorway to the studio.

A large wolf, its coat as sleek and light colored as the Russian's hair now stood where he had been. It growled, its huge fangs bared, its large dark eyes trained on Jie.

In the next moment, the two other large *lang ren* lunged for Meg, grabbing her one by each arm.

"Jie!" she screamed. She struggled and twisted, helpless in their iron grip.

Raw molten anger poured through Jie. He yelled and lunged for Meg's captors with a growl in his throat. He delivered a hand chop to one's chest. The force of the blow caused him to release Meg, freeing her to twist around and kick her other captor hard in the knee. He still held on to her but now only with one hand and she was able to chop him in the rib cage, freeing herself.

From the corner of her eye, Jie saw Danny and Dave charge into the room, standing over the fallen *lang ren*. When he tried to get up, Dave punched him down while Danny pulled Meg away.

Knowing Meg was relatively safe, Jie was able to keep his attention riveted on the growling, snarling wolf. The creature seemed to be waiting for Jie to change. The other two, still in human form, closed in on him.

*They touched her*, Jie thought, his anger still pouring through him in waves like lava down the side of a volcano. The heat of his anger caused him to break out in a sweat. *They made her scream in pain and fear.*

The *lang ren* lunged at him, throwing a punch.

Jie caught the punch in his open hand, following the weight of the attack down toward the floor, diffusing its force.

A flash of pain ripped through him, driving him to his knees. He thought for a moment the wolf had attacked him but when he looked up, it stood nearby, watching him. Waiting.

Jie realized what was happening. The *lang ren* had grabbed Meg on purpose to release his anger. *To release the beast.*

The change was slow, tearing at him the way it had two days before. He fell onto his back, staring up blankly, pain ripping through his limbs.

The skinny *lang ren's* face appeared, hovering over him, grinning. "I'll help you move faster, my friend," he said. "Imagine that large Russian *bodark* running his hands over your mate's breasts, squeezing them. Tasting them."

A surge of change rippled through him, the speed increased. Each mention of Meg being raped by the other *lang ren* caused a surge of uncontrollable anger.

"Imagine that tongue teasing her nipples—"

That did it. The change ripped through him with such speed, he didn't have time to remove his clothing first. Part of his clothing ripped, while other parts slipped off.

In the next moment, he was in wolf form, his clothing hanging around his canine body in tatters.

Catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror, he saw the contrast of his sleek ebony coat to his opponent's. Their sizes too, were unmatched. The Russian was nearly two of Jie in body weight alone. But Jie had only to think of his rival in human form forcing himself on Meg, raping her and making her cry. He looked at the Russian and growled, his hackles rising.

Meg watched the two creatures circling around each other. Tears slipped from her eyes, streaming noiselessly down her cheeks. Only after several moments did she realize she had fistfuls of Danny's shirt, pulling it in tightly curled fingers. She couldn't see how Jie would defeat this monster nearly twice his size. Yet only one of them would finish the fight alive.

The Russian growled and leaped at Jie.

She screamed.

The large yellow-furred *lang ren* landed on Jie causing them to slide across the floor in a black and yellow heap. The two wolf bodies hit the mirror and bounced off.

Meg stared as the fighters clashed together and separated after several moments. She could see that even in wolf form, Jie seemed to be using *tai chi* to fight, diffusing his opponent's attacks by absorbing the force and rolling if necessary or sliding across the floor until the momentum died.

The Russian took another leap at Jie. Jie skidded off to the side, avoiding him, causing his opponent to slide into the mirror. The large yellow body hit the mirror with such force, the glass cracked.

At first, he seemed stunned but after another moment, turned, fixing a stare on Meg and growled.

The next thing she knew, he charged her. She screamed.

He never reached her. Jie intercepted him in a flash of huge canine jaws. The Russian yelped from the impact of Jie's fangs sinking into the yellow fur. The large wolf bucked and reared, obviously trying to shake Jie off him but Jie held on tenaciously.

When Jie finally pulled away from the bite, he reared up and grabbed the other wolf around the neck with his front paws and sank his teeth again into his opponent's head.

The Russian yelped again and headed for the window to the street. When he neared it, he leaped, taking Jie with them. They crashed together through the old plate glass window onto the street.

Meg heard only the sound of crashing glass and then human screams of shock as the two large creatures rolled onto the sidewalk, still locked together.

The Russian finally disengaged himself from Jie's bite, portions of his yellow fur stained crimson. He seemed momentarily disoriented.

Meg watched the fight, her body frozen.

Jie stood watching him, his hackles up, shards of broken glass scattered around his paws.

The Russian growled at him and lunged again at the two bodies. The contrast of their opposite-colored fur flashed as they rolled and writhed in the street, stopping traffic.

The screams of frightened people continued, mingling with the sounds of honking horns and crying children. Jie disengaged himself from the Russian's attack and leapt onto the hood of a cab that their fight had halted. The driver cowered inside, quickly rolling up his window.

Jie clambered up onto the roof, followed by the Russian. Jie leaped off and moved toward the broken window of the studio.

The Russian leaped after him, landing on him squarely. Their death struggle continued. Jie seemed to be working his way back to the studio, hovering around the edge of the broken glass. He reared up, causing the Russian to rear up with him. On their hind legs, they locked again in a struggle, moving around on their hind quarters.

In the next second, Jie locked his front legs around the other *lang ren's* neck, twisted around and fell over, on top of him.

The Russian let out a loud yelp then lay perfectly still, a pool of scarlet running out of his side from the large shard of glass that had impaled him.

Jie rolled off him and took off, running so fast, he disappeared in seconds.

"Jie!" Megan yelled. She pulled away from Danny's protective embrace, ran to the broken window and jumped over the mess of broken glass and dead wolf to peer down the street. All she saw was a crowd of confused, frightened people and backed-up cars.

Jie was gone.

## Chapter Fourteen

Meg ran through the streets until her lungs burned for air. Her desperation to find Jie mounted more with each second. What if he'd been badly hurt in the fight? She skidded to a stop, gasping for breath, her hands on her thighs.

When her breathing had calmed enough, she straightened up, scanning the buildings and streets. No sign of Jie. Tears crowded her eyes.

As she stood, watching for him, a new terror rose. She felt what he felt in her heart, their deep connection giving her access to Jie's emotions.

He was shocked and ashamed. He'd just killed another living creature. No matter that it was in self-defense and in her defense. He hated killing. It horrified him, yet he'd been forced to do it. He hated what he was and didn't want her to look at him.

He wasn't sure if he was going to come back.

She whimpered as a fresh spate of tears pooled in her eyes. She rubbed roughly at them with the heel of one hand. Her heart still pounded and she felt torn. She wanted to be out looking for him but if he came back, she wouldn't be there. Yet sitting and waiting for him would also be a torture. She knew beyond a doubt that he'd run so far away by this time, she'd never find him, even if she went driving around in a car looking for him. With her shoulders sagging, she turned and walked back to the store.

The side street on which the fight had taken place was now cleared out. The only evidence of the earlier death struggle was the broken glass and some bloodstains on the sidewalk. Even the dead *lang ren* was gone.

"Meg!"

She looked up at the sound of Danny's voice. He came through the broken window and rushed over to her, pulling her into his arms. "Meg, I was so worried about you." He squeezed her tightly.

Meg let her body sag against her friend. His embrace was a small haven from the horror of what had just happened. "I couldn't find him," she murmured into Danny's shirt.

Danny's hand moved across her hair in a brotherly caress. "Don't worry, he'll be back. Come, let's go inside." With his arm across her shoulders he began to lead her around the corner. "Dave locked up the store. We're going upstairs. You need a rest."

Meg only nodded, letting Danny lead her as if she were a child. "I want to find him," she said as they went around the corner to the back entrance. "What if he's hurt?"

Danny squeezed her shoulders. "I'll ask Dave to drive around and look for him."

"I want to go too."

"All right. Just rest for a few minutes first."

They turned the corner.

Meg looked up and gasped. The skinny *lang ren* stood in the alleyway near the entrance to the staircase that led to her apartment. A black car was parked, its engine running. The two large *lang ren*s occupied the front seat. She shrank back in fear and prepared to run but he held up a hand. "Don't worry, we're leaving." He gave her a strange smile. A gleam of satisfaction, almost peaceful, shone in his eyes.

"Where's...the body?" Danny asked him, shielding Megan somewhat with his body in front of hers.

Yelin gestured with a nod of his head. "In the car. We'll see to his...disposal. We take care of our own." He smiled his gap-tooth grin at her. She had no idea that he was actually the Chinese *bodark's* rival for her, not Schenko. However, there was no need to divulge such information. The Chinese had rid the world of Schenko for him. The Chinese *bodark* only wanted the girl. That was obvious. They weren't going to come after him. "And don't worry, *dyevooshka*, he'll be back. Do not pursue him. He will only feel ashamed. But you already knew that."

She narrowed her eyes, visibly fighting back tears. "How do you know he'll come back? Why should I believe you?"

He gestured again toward the car. "Because, my dear, he just killed in your defense. You're mated for life. Where else would he go now?"

Before the girl could answer, he turned, got into the backseat of the car and shut the door. He kept watching her as the car rolled down the alley past her and her friend and then rounded the corner.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jie kept running. He'd done the one thing he'd vowed never to do in his entire life. But life had forced his hand and now he couldn't bear to stop and look.

No matter that the entire situation was completely out of anyone's control, his own included. He couldn't face Meg right now, couldn't slow down and let her see him like this, a horrid hulking killer beast. No matter how much she believed she loved him, he was cursed and he couldn't allow her to be burdened with someone like him. In time, she'd remember watching him kill and be horrified. Just the way Su Lin had been horrified by his sympathies.

The only good thing in all this was that Meg was safe.

He had to find a place to hide. He didn't look like any ordinary dog and would attract attention to himself running along the roads the way he was, threading through sidewalks of people, many of whom froze in their tracks at the sight of him, screamed or dropped packages they were carrying.

The little *lang ren* had used words to goad him into the change, making his anger a tool for him to fight with. But how long would he remain in wolf form? He still did not control his own change.

He had no idea where he was but he kept running until the urban setting gave way to a more residential area. He ran a bit longer until there were actually patches of trees and woods here and there in what appeared a wealthier residential neighborhood with beautiful houses.

He found a copse of trees in someone's backyard and buried himself as deeply inside it as he could. Standing between two large tree trunks, he stood, his sleek black sides heaving, his head hung low and his tail drooping between his hind legs.

Worst of all, the only thing he wanted was Meg. As shameful as he felt, he knew she would embrace him, holding him against her, offering all the comfort she was capable of while wishing him only to be happy and well.

He shivered, shaking his entire body as if bugs were crawling on him and he wanted to get them off. His heart lurched and his need for her caused an ache deeper than any he'd ever felt. He resisted it the way he'd always resisted the change. A whimper escaped him and he lay down on the ground, his muzzle between his two front paws. What he was waiting for, he wasn't exactly sure. He just didn't know what else to do. If there was a definition of Hell, this was it.

Only hours later, after the sun had long fallen down and it was probably close to midnight, did he realize at all that at least part of the Hell he was in was of his own making. No one had a gun to his head forcing him to refuse the refuge of Meg's love. He couldn't stay with her but he was probably going to change soon and longed for the safety she made him feel. If just for a little while. Then he would go. He wasn't safe for her. He'd have to return to China without her. He knew his desire to see her one more time was selfish but he was as powerless to fight it as he was powerless to fight the change.

He rose from the spot he'd been lying in for hours and hours and shook the dirt and leaves from his fur. He emerged from the copse of trees and searched the night for the direction from which he'd come.

## Chapter Fifteen

Meg stared blankly at the television screen. Danny had tried to get her to watch a Jackie Chan movie, hoping it would at least distract her for a little while but she could only let the images on the television pass mindlessly while she sighed and ached for Jie.

Mei was curled up on her lap, purring.

Dave, who sat on her other side, had driven around earlier for over two hours, searching for him and had come back unsuccessful. He had, however, picked up a few items of clothing for Jie in the hopes that he would come back. In the meantime, she and Danny boarded up the broken window cleared away the shattered glass.

Next to Mei on her lap she held Jie's silk pajama pants, over which she ran her fingertips back and forth. Touching the soft material he'd been wearing just before making love to her the night before brought her comfort. It was now almost one in the morning and she was beginning to despair.

Danny leaned over and kissed her head. She looked up and gave him a weak smile. He and Dave had her sandwiched between them, comforting her, protecting her. She couldn't imagine better friends.

"I know he'll be back, Meggie," Danny said.

She looked at him. "How can you be sure? I know that guy said the same thing. But if he feels that horrible, he might not." She fought another wave of tears.

"Danny's right, sweetheart," Dave said. "I'm not a werewolf but as you know, I ran away myself a few months ago." He sighed, conveying the regret he still felt over the one large fight he and Danny ever had. Out of shame from something in his own past, Dave had left, not wanting to accept Danny's love, and it seemed as though he wasn't coming back. But he had. "If he loves you like I love Danny, he won't stay stupid for too long." Dave reached behind Meg and ruffled Danny's hair.

Suddenly the downstairs buzzer went off.

Meg gasped and catapulted off the sofa. "That could be him!"

Danny stood up, his expression hardening. "I hope so but just in case, let me and Dave check first."

He and Dave went out the door and down the stairs. Meg lifted Mei off her lap and followed them, Jie's silk pants clutched in her hands, her heart thrashing in her chest.

Downstairs, Dave unlocked the door that led to the outside.

Meg's heart leaped in joy when she saw who was there.

Jie was naked, crouched down, looking up at her.

"Jie!" She pushed past Dave who stood aside. Lunging forward, she crouched down, tears brimming in her eyes. "Jie." She pulled him into her embrace.

"Meg," he whispered, his voice hoarse and thick. The fight and the transition from human to animal and back seemed to take a toll on him. His body was shaking in spite of the warm summer evening.

"Meg," he said again, burrowing his face in the hollow of her neck.

Tears came to her eyes and she stroked his hair, rocking him like he was a child in her arms. As if they were connected by an invisible thread, she felt his pain and torment racking her as though it were her own. It *was* her own, she realized. She shared it with him because she loved him and saw what a good man he was. She pressed a tender kiss onto his hair. "It's all right, Jie. It's all right." She rocked him a few moments longer. "Come, get dressed and come upstairs. You must be tired and hungry." Gently, she released him and helped him on with the pants.

"Do you need help?" Dave asked. He had retreated up the stairs and was looking down at her with concern.

She shook her head. "We'll make it."

"I'll heat up the soup you made earlier," Danny said.

She nodded. "Thank you."

Dave followed Danny back up the steps, leaving her alone with Jie.

"You have good friends," Jie rasped.

Speech sounded difficult for him and the catch in his voice caused her heart to squeeze. "You're one of them, Jie," she said softly. She took his hands. "Can you get up the steps?"

He nodded.

Slowly, step by step, they made it back into the apartment. She led Jie over to the sofa and put her small fleece throw around his shoulders. Danny brought over a bowl of vegetable soup and set it on the coffee table along with a spoon. Then he excused himself and Dave and retreated into the bedroom she'd given Jie the night before.

"Danny and Dave offered to stay here. So I wouldn't be alone. And...to help...us...when you came back."

He glanced at her with a sheepish expression in his eyes and she sensed that he felt ashamed for having run away. To her, it wasn't important. All that mattered was he was back and he was alive. She lifted the bowl and presented it to Jie. "You must be starved." She couldn't imagine Jie had eaten while he was away.

He nodded and she noticed that he was distinctly avoiding her gaze. He took the bowl from her and held it to his lips, sipping the broth straight from the bowl.

She watched in amazement his Adam's apple sliding up and down as he swallowed, never stopping until he drained all the broth.

He set the bowl on his lap. "This is good," he said, his voice sounding smoother after having the liquid.

She nodded and picked up the spoon. She handed it to him and he scooped out the vegetables, one spoonful after the other, as if he'd not had a bite of food in days.

"Would you like more?" she asked when he scooped out the last spoonful of vegetables.

He shook his head. "No, thank you." He sat quietly, letting her take the bowl from his hands, which then fell into his lap.

She set the bowl aside on the table and looked at him, her nerves painfully on edge. She wasn't sure what to say to him, sensing that it was difficult for him to accept the comfort she offered even though he seemed to want it at the same time. "Would you... Would you like a bath?"

He glanced up at her again, his almond eyes dark and shimmering even through the sorrow they expressed.

She put her hand gently on his shoulder, feeling the muscle quiver in spite of the blanket covering it. "Come on, I'll help you."

Obediently, he rose from the sofa and followed her through her bedroom to the bathroom. She flicked on the light and knelt down by the tub, busying herself with preparing the bath.

As the tub filled, Jie leaned back against the vanity, his head bowed. He was the most sedate she'd seen him since they met and Meg couldn't help the nagging voice inside that told her he didn't want to stay here with her and that as soon as he'd regrouped from this horrible event he would go back to China. Without her.

The tub was full and she turned off the faucets. "It's ready."

He nodded and silently pushed away from the counter, slipping off the silk pants.

In spite of the situation, she couldn't stop herself from admiring his body, the sculpted curves and bulges of muscle and the way they flexed in various points as he moved. Sinfully, she also stole a look at his dragon, experiencing the most wicked desire to kneel before him and take him deep into her mouth. To her, he was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen.

He lowered himself into the tub and sat huddled, his arms locked around his knees.

She reached for a cloth and dipped it into the hot water, wondering as she filled it with soap what the fight with the Russian *lang ren* must have been like for him to leave him in this subdued, faraway state.

She sensed it was not the time to discuss anything with him and quietly smoothed the soapy washcloth across his back, in as gentle movements as she could.

"Thank you, Meg," he murmured, surprising her that he'd spoken at all.

She smiled, feeling hot tears collect in the corners of her eyes. "You're very welcome."

She washed his back for several minutes, listening to the gentle dripping sound of the water each time she dipped the cloth in it. He leaned back, making her think she

should continue her washing on his front but when she did, he grasped her wrist lightly.

"You don't have to do this," he said. "I ran away from you."

She returned the wide intense gaze he was giving her. "You saved my life and then you came back."

He looked at her a moment longer then released her wrist. He leaned back, his arms on the sides of the tub.

She rubbed the cloth gently across his chest, over his shoulders and into his armpits. Bathing him, she decided, was incredibly pleasurable and she couldn't help noticing the way his body responded, the erection that rose up under the surface of the water.

"You saw what I become. A filthy beast."

The tone in his voice caused her stop in mid-wipe across his chest. "Not filthy. A beautiful creature." She looked at him, sensing he was trying to tell her something. Something she didn't want to hear. "I don't care."

"Maybe you will. It's loathsome."

Her heart thumped. "No. Not at all." Truthfully, although it was strange, the fact that he was a *lang ren* didn't bother her in the least. "Please, let me decide." She reached out and stroked his hair.

His jaw tensed and a sheen of misery glazed his eyes. "I'm a killer," he said between clenched teeth. His shame was painfully obvious.

But Meg shook her head vigorously. "You were given no choice. It was self-defense. His life or yours. I know you would never have done it in a million years."

Jie was silent for several moments. He seemed to be absorbing her words. "Come in here with me, Meg," he whispered finally, looking her in the eyes for the first time that night. His skin and hair glistened with droplets of bathwater.

She couldn't help stealing glances at the water beading off his chest, over his dark brown nipples.

Her heart sped up and her stomach fluttered. She wanted nothing more than what he was asking. Without speaking she pulled off her t-shirt, sweatpants and underwear and climbed into the tub.

Jie opened his arms and spread his legs apart so she could fit between them. He pulled her against him with her back to his chest. His erection pressed into the soft crevice of her buttocks, immediately causing her body to begin its melting surrender.

She leaned her head back against him and closed her eyes.

He slipped his hands around her front, his fingertips sliding over her rib cage and up until his hands palmed her breasts. He squeezed the soft orbs gently in his hands, lightly pinching her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers.

Meg moaned softly and rubbed against him, causing his fully hard cock to surge against her. He bent his head and dappled moist warm kisses along the side of her neck, stopping every few kisses to nibble gently on her skin.

The water sloshed against the sides of the tub, the tiny waves growing as they writhed against each other.

Suddenly, she felt Jie's hands close around her upper arms, holding her still. His body stopped moving underneath her and she felt tension fill his body. She stilled. "Jie? What is it?"

"Not like this, Meg," he murmured. "Not like a wild animal." Slowly, he sat up, turning her around to face him.

She looked at him. His dark eyes blazed and the small muscles of his jaw worked.

She reached up and cupped his cheek. "It's all right."

He covered her hand with his. "No, it's not. Dammit, Meg. I'm a doctor, not a werewolf. I'm supposed to heal people, not kill them."

She leaned forward and put her arms around him, her heart aching. "Jie, I'll help you in any way I can."

He seemed reluctant at first to return her embrace but after a moment, his arms closed around her, holding her tight against him.

She reached up and caressed his hair. "I promise, Jie. Please let me."

He pressed his face into her neck and his back heaved under her hands. One hand curled into her hair and he held her tight in his arms.

She held him and rocked him gently, realizing that he was crying quietly, wetting her skin with his tears.

The bathwater had begun to cool when Jie finally lifted his face and looked at her. Grief ringed his eyes.

She brushed a tear off his cheek with her thumb. Another tear rolled down over his lip. She leaned forward, her eyes closed and kissed the tear off his soft lips. She opened her eyes and smiled at him. "I want you to be part of my family, Jie," she said softly. "You and Master Li."

His lower lip trembled slightly. "I would like that."

After a few more moments, she took hold of his hands. "You need some rest."

She reached over and pulled the plug from the drain. Jie stood up, reaching down to help her up.

She rose to her knees, intending to stand but finding herself at eye-level with his hard cock she remained as she was. Gingerly, she reached out her hand and ran her fingertips up and down the silky hard length.

Jie's breath rasped and his hand came down onto her hair, his fingers weaving into the wet strands.

Encouraged, she leaned forward, intending to take him into her mouth but Jie stopped her.

"Megan, you don't have to do this."

She gazed up at him, pained by the hesitation in his eyes. "I want to," she breathed. She reached one hand around, boldly stroking his hard buttocks while caressing his rigid shaft with the other.

His breath rasped again and she felt his body surrender under her hands.

Before he could protest again, she closed her eyes and parted her lips. Holding the base of Jie's cock with one hand, she slid her mouth down onto him.

He groaned softly.

Anchoring herself with her hands on his hips, she took him in as deeply as she could, loving the feel of his cock against her tongue and lips. He tasted musky and delicious and she savored him, sucking slowly in a rhythmic motion.

"Meg," he ground out in a hoarse voice, his hands winding into her damp hair.

She tightened the suction of her lips, pulling a droplet of pre-cum from the tiny opening in the head of his cock. She licked it off with the flat of her tongue, swallowing it greedily, as if she could take him inside her so he could never leave.

"Meg," he breathed again in a throaty whisper. Gently he pulled himself away and lifted her by the shoulders. His lids were heavy over his brown almond eyes and his face was flushed. "I was getting very close," he said softly. "I want to be inside you."

His words stoked the heat already blazing in her pussy. "I want that too," she whispered.

Megan took Jie's towel off the bar and dried his back. Wordlessly, he took it from her hands and did the same for her.

They stepped out of the tub onto the bathmat and finished drying off. She hung the towel up, turned off the bathroom light, then led Jie into the bedroom, closing the bathroom door behind them.

Pulling back the covers in the dark room, she climbed into the bed and slid over, making room for him. Her entire body hummed with the anticipation of lying in his arms again, her naked body pressed to his. Just the memory of how he'd felt and tasted in her mouth only heightened her need.

Jie climbed into the bed and pulled her against him, spooning the front of his body to her back. He lay quietly, holding her, pressing small kisses to the back of her neck while his hand caressed her hip in slow, sensuous circles. He lifted his lips from her skin. "I'm sorry I frightened you," he whispered. "You probably thought I'd abandoned you."

She sighed, rubbing her hand lightly over his, which came to rest on her hip. Her body was opening and melting from the masculine warmth of his skin and muscles pressed along her back but she forced herself to remain quiet and not demand anything

of him. "I was afraid that maybe you had but Danny was certain you'd come back. And so was..." She hesitated on the word, afraid to mention him.

"The *lang ren*...the skinny one," he finished for her.

She caught her breath. "How did you know?"

His hand slid up, gently covering her right breast. "I don't know how. I just knew." He squeezed her breast softly, causing her to moan. He fell silent and pressed his lips again to her neck, feathering the tip of his tongue on her skin. He fondled her breast another moment until her nipple was hard and erect under his fingertips, then slid his touch down her stomach, over her pubic mound, slipping between her lower lips. His fingertips caressed her already swollen clit.

She let out a heavy breath, parting her legs. "Jie," she whispered. She loved saying his name.

Her fervent whisper seemed to rouse him further. He spread her wide open and she felt the swollen head of his erection pushing into her slick entrance.

She raised her backside until he slid easily all the way in. The satisfying friction released a sigh from her and she gave herself completely over to the delicious sensation of his erection filling her completely.

In a rhythmic motion, he slid in and out, his hand stealing back up to her breast, caressing it and squeezing it in turns while he showered hot, moist kisses on the side of her neck. Once again he lowered his hand down between her legs and rubbed her clitoris while he glided in and out of her.

She gasped and moved her hips against his, increasing the friction on her clit. Harder and faster he moved until the pressure built and exploded, causing her body to arch against the waves of orgasm plowing through it.

She went limp against him and he stopped moving, holding her and caressing her skin. Then he was turning her over, placing his body between her legs, sliding back up into her with possessive yet tender fervor.

She held on to him, her fingertips digging into the hard muscles of his back. Nothing was quite like having Jie inside her, surrounding her, loving her. She squeezed her muscles around his shaft and moved in a rhythm against him, eager to pleasure him and bring him to the ecstatic place he brought her.

He took her mouth in a deep kiss and she felt like their souls were joining. She slipped one hand into his hair, the other grasping his hard buttock, feeling the muscles strain as he moved inside her.

She didn't know how long they were joined together, the only sounds in the dark room the creaking of the bed and their murmurs and sighs of pleasure. In the next moment, she felt his completion, the hot pulsing of his seed spilling inside her. He came and then rested quietly on top of her, his hot breath on her neck.

She squeezed him tightly in her arms, afraid that if she let go of him, he would vanish. Were they so deeply connected that she sensed his innermost thoughts? "Jie," she whispered.

He raised his face from her neck and looked down at her in the shadowy darkness. "Yes?"

"Why do I feel like you're going to leave me? Is it my own fear, or am I sensing your thoughts?" She dreaded the answer but knew she'd never fall asleep without knowing.

He sighed deeply and rolled off her onto his back. He stared up into space for what seemed an interminable time.

Her heart pounded fiercely and she fought not to push him into answering.

Finally, he turned to her. "I don't see how I can stay here with you, Meg, knowing what I'm capable of. I know I would never try to hurt you or Mei but I don't trust the beast."

She sat bolt upright. "You're going to leave me?" Her voice rang through the room. No doubt Danny and Dave could hear. "You can't do that!"

Jie sat up, his hands out in a pleading gesture. "Meg, do you think I want to leave? I love you. I traveled to the other side of the world to find you and to keep you safe. This is not a choice."

"What about the astrology? If I'm your mate, how can you leave?"

Jie sat back, pushing a hand through his hair. "If I'm your mate, how could I want to endanger you?"

She crossed her arms, surprising herself with her own zeal. A memory of Ben flashed in her mind, of him telling her he was going to San Francisco even though she wouldn't leave. She'd felt hurt and cried but she hadn't reacted like this, as if losing him was like losing her own life. God, she couldn't let Jie go!

A knock sounded on the bathroom door. "Meg?" Danny's voice sounded on the other side. "Are you all right?"

"No! Jie wants to leave."

The door opened and Danny stood in the doorway, wearing only boxers. Dave loomed behind him. "I'm sorry, we couldn't help but hear. Dave and I had exactly this type of conversation."

Jie pushed the sheet up to cover Meg's breasts.

Meg looked at Jie while she held the sheet to her front.

The bedclothes were wrapped around his waist and his head was bowed. "Meg, I'm sorry," he murmured.

"Danny! Dave! He won't listen to me! Tell him he's wrong!"

"Jie, Dave wanted to leave me for very much the same reason," Danny said softly. "He thought he would hurt me."

Dave hung his arm around Danny, pulling him gently back against him. "I still regret making him feel so afraid about that." He looked at Jie. "If you love her, you shouldn't leave."

Jie raised his head. To Meg's surprise, he didn't seem to feel there was anything wrong or unusual about having two gay, nearly naked men in the bedroom, discussing his woman problem with him. "I don't know what else to do."

"Stay," Danny said.

Meg's tears began to slip from her eyes. She reached up to rub them and felt Jie's gentle grasp on her wrist. She opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Your friends are very loyal," he said softly. "Somehow, I think if I try to leave, they won't let me."

Meg imagined Dave and Danny in their boxers, blocking Jie at the doorway of the apartment. She giggled softly through her tears. "I think you're right."

"Meg," Jie said softly between heavy breaths, "I want you to marry me, really. I don't want to leave. I *want* to stay here with you and teach those classes and help you fight the developers. And then I want to take you to China to meet my godfather. I want him to come back here with us."

Meg felt a flicker of hope. "But if you leave me, you can't do any of those things."

Jie looked down again, seeing peripherally that Dave and Danny had softly retreated, closing the door again. "I know. Perhaps there's something we can do."

"What? Anything." Meg's hand clutched his arm.

"There are...exercises we can practice together. Perhaps if we can strengthen and purify our yin and yang together, our combined life force can give me the energy I need not to change."

Meg's fingers tightened on his arm. "And then you'll stay?"

He nodded.

Her eyes still appeared troubled. "And if they don't work? If you still change? Will you insist on leaving me again?"

The question pierced his heart, probably because the answer was yes. "Can we try and see? I held off the change for months with tai chi alone. With your yin, I think we can have success." He reached up and touched her cheek. "Please, Meg, don't make me promise you. If I ever did something to hurt you, I couldn't live with myself." His heart squeezed some more and the pain in her expression almost made him break down. Only the memory of the dead wolf, sliced apart on the shards of glass made him stand firm.

Slowly, Meg nodded. A tear dropped from one eye and ran down her cheek. "If that's what it will take to be with you, all right."

He brushed the teardrop away with the pad of his thumb. "All I can promise you, Meg, is that you're in my heart. Deep in my heart and will always be, no matter what happens."

She nodded again and closed her eyes. When she opened them, the sadness was still there. "That's enough for me," she whispered.

"Thank you." He leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. He knew it wasn't enough, but it was what he had to give her.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

*Two months later...*

*Beijing, China*

He didn't know who he was or how he'd come to be alive. All he remembered was waking up naked, with the winds of the grassy plain passing over him. He spent the days wandering as a man, the nights as a beast, a wolf-like creature that hunted, fed and roamed until the sun rose and he became a man again.

In spite of his own mysterious origin, he'd known exactly which direction to wander. His path brought him closer each day to a small hut where a kind old man, someone he remembered somehow as important to him, had smiled when he saw him and said, "Welcome home, my son."

The old man had fed him meat and given him clothes to wear, baggy pants and shirt and sandals for his feet, rejoicing that he had returned. Where he'd returned from, he didn't know but after living a while in the tiny house with—his father?—a growing restlessness plagued him, a hunger he couldn't identify or ignore. The feeling grew so torturous that one night before sunrise, as soon as he'd returned to human form, he'd risen, dressed, slipped his feet into his sandals and walked out.

He kept walking, letting his body guide him. Days passed and he found himself in this city, standing in front of a tall building. He didn't understand why he'd come here, he knew only that he had to wait.

Hours went by. The air grew hotter as the sun rose in the shimmering blue sky. Automobiles passed on the street. People on bicycles, so many bicycles, pedaled past him, ignoring him. The world was so large, it was actually frightening but the hunger gnawing at his soul was greater, pushing back the fear.

Then he finally knew why he was here, at this building. A woman walked out of the front door, a beautiful woman with a slim body and pale skin, her jet black hair pulled smoothly off her face. She didn't notice him as she passed. The high heels of her shoes clicked on the pavement, her body swayed with her graceful movements.

He only knew that he needed her. He started to follow her, trying to speak but there were no words in his throat. No human voice. Only an animal-like growl.

The sound caused her to turn her head. She looked at him, her large dark eyes full of recognition. Her full lips parted slightly and she stopped. "What are you doing here?" Her voice trembled on the question. She was obviously not happy to see him.

He couldn't answer. He only reached for her, grasped her arm.

She yelped and pulled away. "Don't touch me!" She whirled around and walked away, almost running.

His desperation rose. Why was she frightened of him? He'd only ever loved her. He'd never wanted to hurt her. Yet he felt her hatred. He followed her, matched the speed of her steps. He reached out and grasped her shoulder. He could practically feel her soft skin through the silky blouse.

She wheeled around, her pretty face creased in anger, her eyes fearful. "Don't touch me or I'll scream!"

He didn't understand her fear and hostility. He was desperate to reach her. He was dying inside and needed her help. He grasped her shoulders with both hands and made one of the only sounds he could besides the howl he produced when he was the beast hunting. He grunted.

She screamed. Again. And again.

Now the people on their bicycles were stopping. They noticed him now. Yet nobody tried to pull him off her. They stood, frozen, regarding him with fearful, wide eyes. He didn't understand all this fear. He was only begging her to listen. Why couldn't she just listen? He never had hurt her and never would.

Sirens rang in his ears. A car had screeched to a halt on the curb and two uniformed men got out, running toward them. Strong hands wrestled him off her, yanked his arms behind his back, forced him to the ground so hard his cheek scraped against the pavement.

He grunted and struggled but in vain. Chains were clasped around his wrists and he was dragged back to his feet and forced into the car. He struggled uselessly against his bonds. He had to get out, get back to her. He needed her so desperately. He peered through the window. She stood with one of the men who'd arrested him, her pretty face in tears, a wisp of her hair escaped from its bun in their struggle. He wanted to cry out to her, to beg her for help but he couldn't make any sound except a desperate growl.

He watched that man leave her, approach the car, get into the front seat. The driver started up the engine and pulled away. Soon, she would be gone and he'd be helpless. Completely alone and helpless. He threw his body against the door, only to receive a sharp reprimand. All he knew was that if she didn't help him, the one he needed so desperately, he'd die.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

*One day later in Chinatown, Boston*

Jie lifted his hands to Megan's bare breasts.

The full undersides of soft orbs filled his palms and he squeezed them gently, brushed his thumbs over her dusky nipples.

Meg's breath caught softly and she leaned back against his naked torso. The movement pushed the top of her buttocks into his dragon, which, of course, rose and grew hard. He dragged in a breath.

Self-control was not going to be easy.

Meg's skin, fresh from her bath, exuded the scent of roses mixed with the deeper musk emanating from her yin cave. Her arousal shimmered in the air around them and the scent strengthened as their bodies touched. The heel of Meg's foot positioned against her moist open core also heightened Jie's tension. Her golden hair, gathered in a loose bun at the nape of her neck, brushed his lips.

She must have sensed his hesitation for she turned her head, shifted her body so she could look at him. Her breasts slipped from his hands and she frowned. Meg was a sensitive woman, even more deeply connected to him because she was his true mate, as dear to him now as his godfather. "Jie," she said near a whisper, "I love you as you are. You know that." She reached up and cupped his cheek. Her thumb brushed his skin.

In the muted lamplight of the bedroom, he saw the flicker of pain in her almond-shaped eyes. His heart squeezed. All she wanted was for him not to be tormented anymore. The urgency of his desire to cure himself of his lycanthropy lent a heavy air even to the pleasurable practice of the sexual *Tao*.

So far, the Dragon-Tigress practice was working. Since they'd been practicing, he hadn't undergone the change once. He intended to keep it that way, in spite of the fact that he'd lost some of his physical strength. Megan's happiness depended on it. The longer he stayed human, the longer he could stay with her.

He bowed his head. "I know you do." He put his hand on her shoulder and bade her to turn back around.

Meg yielded under his touch and he encircled her in his arms once again, positioning his hands over her breasts. "Remember," he said, "Seventy-two times in one direction and then seventy-two in the other direction."

She nodded, her breathing already growing heavier. "I remember," she whispered and leaned back against him.

The shift of her body sent fresh thrills of heat into his dragon and yang pearls. He dragged in a deep breath and started moving his hands, his touch mere ghostlike

whispers over her flesh. His fingertips grazed the soft skin of her breasts. He avoided her nipples but Jie could tell from the rasp of her breathing that the tiny peaks had hardened.

Keeping track of the number of times he'd circled her breasts was very difficult and he had to force his attention back to counting, working against the *yin* tide rising in Meg's body. When he'd finished the first seventy-two circles, he paused and switched direction. His fingertips brushed Meg's nipples as he did so.

Another soft moan slipped from her and she moved against him, rubbing his raging erection. He fought the urge to turn her around, lay her down and take her. He'd done so several times in the beginning of their practice before he'd gotten control of his hunger.

Meg's *yin* dew rose like a tidal wave. Jie felt the force of it, both her female energy and the physical moisture seeping from her hot core. Her body trembled against his, her breasts rose and fell heavily under his circling hands. "Jie," she whispered, her voice tight and ragged, "I'm ready. Please...release me."

Her plea sent the hunger rippling through his loins. He pulled away from her, turned her pliant body easily around and laid her on her back. Meg's soft lips were parted and she looked up at him from under heavy lids. It took all the control in his possession not to climb between her thighs and slide into her.

He settled onto the mattress beside her and lowered his mouth to one full, soft breast. Her flowery scent assaulted him and he closed his lips over her nipple, tugged it gently between his lips and tongue. The tender bud tightened, released its musky flavor and Jie felt his body relax, entering the flow of pleasure. He reached for her other breast and squeezed it tenderly. He drew it closer, gently yet urgently chafed the nipple between his fingertips.

Meg moaned softly and clutched his hair with both hands. His hair was too short to gain purchase so her fingers opened and closed in a feverish tempo. She was panting and her hips rose and fell in rhythm with his sucking, her body so obviously desperate for release. Her *yin* energy now flowed freely into him, swirling, mixing with his life force.

Jie pulled his mouth off her nipple and took the other one between his lips. He licked and sucked it with tender care, drawing from it more of Meg's *yin*. Already the gently charged energy of peace tingled inside him, filled him. His mind grew quieter, his body less hungry. His dragon, though still hard, didn't pulse and strain painfully from the lack of direct stimulation.

Not leaving her breast, Jie slid one hand down Meg's stomach, relishing the petal-like softness of her skin. He dragged lightly over the curls on her mound and slipped his fingertips between her lower lips. She parted her legs, freely offering her soft inner sex, swollen and slippery. "Jie," she whispered, her tone begging.

He found her pearl and rubbed it in tiny circles. She especially loved that and he varied the speed and pressure of his fingertips until she panted his name over and over.

She was so responsive, her openness to him made him want to draw out her pleasure as long as possible. Teasingly, he lifted his fingertips from the tiny sensitive nub and slid two fingers inside her.

"Jie!" She lifted her hips off the mattress and moaned softly.

He tugged her nipple hard between his lips and tongue and pulsed his fingers in and out of her at the same time. After several gentle strokes, he slid back to her clitoris. Meg's fully aroused body took only seconds to cascade over the edge. She arched her back and whimpered softly.

He continued rubbing her yin pearl in light, slick circles until the tension drained from her body and she unclenched her hands, her fingers caressing his hair.

Jie lifted his mouth from her breast and gazed down at her. In the soft light, he could see her pale skin was flushed. Her musk filled the space and he sensed her complete satisfaction. A light sheen of perspiration glowed on her pale skin and her breasts still rose and fell with her breathing.

He grinned and licked her dew from his fingertips, relishing the tang of her intimate juices. "Mmm, Meg, you're delicious."

He saw her cheeks darken with a blush and chuckled.

A smile tugged at her lips. "Thank you, I think." She returned his gaze, the satiated look now mingled with concern. "What about you, Jie?"

Before he could answer, the phone rang. Jie wondered if the caller had a telescope trained on his and Meg's bedroom. He was tempted to let the answering machine pick up but a tingle of premonition shivered up his spine. "I'll answer it," he murmured.

Rolling away from Meg, he picked up the receiver and sighed as he brought it to his ear. "Hello?"

At first, no one spoke on the other end. Normally Jie would have thought it was a wrong number but another strange chill passed through him. "Hello?" he said again. Maybe it was his godfather. He'd sent the elderly man a pre-paid phone card so he could call him in case of an emergency from his friend's store on the Chinese side of Xiahe. "Li *sifu*, is that you? It's me, Jie."

"Jie?" It certainly was his godfather's voice. "I-I don't understand."

Jie gripped the phone tighter. Beside him, Meg sat up. "What don't you understand, *sifu*?"

"How is it you are in America?"

The chill snaked again up Jie's spine. There had been moments in the past when he'd doubted his godfather's mental state. He'd always been wrong before but this was too strange. Meg touched his arm, a light touch that conveyed her concern. He looked at her and motioned to her to wait. "I've been here since June, *sifu*," Jie went on. "You know that. I've been in America since you read my astrological chart and told me my mate was here."

"Then it is not you in the Beijing police jail?"

Jie's heart lurched. "What? No, of course not! Why would I be in jail?"

"I received a telegram from Su Lin."

Jie's entire body tensed at the mention of his ex-wife. They hadn't spoken a word to each other since their divorce was finalized five years earlier. Su Lin hated him, at least enough not to want to be with him. She'd obviously cared enough not to report his political leanings to his government. "What did the telegram say, *sifu*?"

"It said she wanted me to come to Beijing and bring you back to Xiahe with me so you wouldn't harass her anymore."

Cold prickles of energy cascaded down Jie's arms. "Harass her? That's impossible! I wouldn't do that. And I haven't even seen her face since the divorce." When he glanced at Meg, she was frowning, her eyes wide with obvious alarm. She knew about his history with Su Lin.

"Jie, I saw you too, my son. You were here for days and then you left again. I didn't know where you went or where to look for you. I was calling this number because I thought you'd gone back to America to be with your mate."

Jie's jaw dropped. "I've...been in America this whole time, *sifu*."

"Jie, what is it? What's happening?" Meg's voice was high pitched now.

He put his hand on her shoulder. "Don't panic," he whispered. "Li *sifu*, if it had been me, wouldn't I have explained my presence to you? How could you think it was me?"

"I-I don't know. He looks just like you. You couldn't speak. I thought it was an effect of your change to the beast. He even has the same scar on his back as you have."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yes, Jie. A jagged scar about three inches long. The one from the bottle." A moment's silence passed before Li spoke again. "I think you must come back to China now, son. Only your presence will clear up the problem."

Jie exhaled, his insides twisting. He struggled to retain the peace that had flooded him moments before while taking in Meg's yin. However, fighting for peace was a paradox, a useless struggle. He surrendered, allowed his anxiety to flow through him.

A measure of tranquility and clear thought remained in its wake. He sighed and leaned back against the pillows. He'd now have to confront Su Lin and show her she was mistaken about him. Whoever was harassing her, it wasn't he. How could it be when he was on the other side of the world with his future wife? "Yes, you're right. I'll come as soon as I can."

He'd been planning to return to China with Meg at some point, to show her some of the places where her grandfather had grown up and then bring his godfather back to America with them. He missed the man who'd looked after him both before and after his parents' murders in Tiananmen Square. He wanted Master Li to meet the wonderful woman he'd led Jie to, as well as to show Meg the land her grandfather had emigrated from.

"I cannot wait to see you again, Jie." The old man's voice was as always, full of affection.

"The feeling is mutual, *sifu*."

"Please hurry though."

"I promise I will." Jie ended the call and replaced the receiver before turning to Meg.

When he did, she was watching him, her brow furrowed. "Something's terribly wrong," she said softly.

"Master Li is all right," he assured her. "But he needs me to return to China as soon as possible." He sighed and then explained to her what had happened. "Meg, you'll need to get a passport immediately." He knew she didn't have one since she'd never flown anywhere. She had a deathly fear of flying, understandably, considering both her parents had died in a plane crash.

To his surprise, she sighed in relief. "I heard you say you'd leave for China as soon as you could." She glanced down, seeming shy. "I...was...afraid you wouldn't want me to go with you."

Her confession tore at his heart. It was his fault that she thought that. His ambivalence about staying with her because of his lycanthropy kept her off balance, the one sticking point in an otherwise sweet and sensual relationship. He pulled her into his arms. "Of course I want you with me, Meg." He rested his cheek on her hair, feeling in one rush of emotion how much she'd come to mean to him in such a short time. The thought of being away from her, so far away, was unbearable. He wanted to say this to her, to admit how deeply in love with her he'd fallen but he still held back, not wanting to burden her with the depth of his emotions when the beast inside him could reemerge at any time.

Meg trembled in his arms. "Until now, I never had reason to overcome my fear of flying," she said softly.

He squeezed her gently and slipped the fingers of one hand into her hair. He loved its silkiness against his skin. "I'm honored you feel that way about me, Meg. Thank you."

She lifted her face and looked up at him. The soft pout of her lower lip and the tangy scent of her yin dew stirred his desire again. His dragon twitched and rose, stretching, hardened with want. But something else was troubling her. They were too deeply connected at this point for him not to recognize it. Meg's fear had a particular scent to it, detectable only to him. He brushed his thumb across her cheek. "What else troubles you?" he asked softly.

Meg remained silent, her gaze locked with his. There was obviously something she was afraid to say.

*Su Lin.* The knowledge rose, unbidden.

Meg knew he'd once loved his first wife very much and that it had been Su Lin who'd wanted to end the marriage, not Jie. Meg also understood the guilt he carried over the failure of that relationship. Maybe she feared he'd want to work things out with his first wife.

He leaned forward and brushed a soft kiss across her lips. "Meg, you're the woman I love. I couldn't be with anyone else in the world now. I swear it."

His admission was rewarded with Meg's smile and the sweet love in her eyes that shone on him. He wished he weren't colorblind so he could see their jade hue.

She rose up slightly and pressed her lips to his. She slipped her tongue past the seam of his lips, seeking his tongue. He met her and tasted her in return.

Meg sighed and pressed in closer to him. Her full breasts flattened deliciously against his chest, the hardness of her nipples pressed into his skin, awakening his body fully. Su Lin had never surrendered herself body and soul to him like this. No woman he'd ever been with had. Meg had nothing to worry about. She was the sweetest, kindest, most passionate and loving woman he'd ever met and he wasn't going anywhere.

Unless he couldn't get rid of the beast inside him.

Now that he'd milked her energy and satisfied her, he was free to make love to her, as long as he didn't spill his seed. The sexual *Tao* taught methods by which a man could climax without ejaculating in order to conserve his *qi* and he'd been practicing. He returned Meg's kiss with growing passion, tasted every soft crevice of her mouth. Her body immediately softened under his hands and she embraced him, pressed her hands into his back.

In sweet surrender, she fell back against the pillows, pulled him down with her.

As if they were one body, she parted her legs and he shifted between them, pushing the head of his straining dragon into her dew-soaked crevice. Reaching down with one hand, he spread her lower lips open, which were moist and swollen with need.

"I love you, Jie," Meg whispered between kisses. She slid her hands down his broad back to his hard buttocks, and squeezed the flexing muscles as his pelvis shifted, the head of his cock seeking her opening. She opened her legs wider and moved with him. She wanted him inside her now.

Jie kissed her. "And I, you." He moved once more and found her opening. Her breath caught softly as the hard tip nudged the edges of her cave and slipped in. She grasped his hips, urging him on. "Jie," she whispered, her eyes fluttering closed.

He plunged in, a long hard stroke that filled her completely.

She cried out at the pleasure and squeezed her inner muscles around his shaft. "Oh, Jie," she whispered. She was feverish with wanting him. Each slide of his hardness sent tingling friction against the walls of her cave. Jie's masculine scent, his immersion in her, the flexing of his muscles against her softness, pushed away all her fears and

doubts. She gave herself over completely to his loving, matching the movements of her body to his. She slowed down when he slowed the rhythm of his strokes and sped up again when he did.

Jie showered tiny kisses along her jaw and down her throat, then feathered the tip of his tongue along her skin as he moved inside her. He gazed down lovingly into her eyes. Even though he rarely spoke of it, his adoration came through in the way he looked at her and touched her. Never in a million years could she have imagined this good fortune would happen to her.

She slid her hands down to Jie's narrow hips, following the movement of his thrusts inside her. She tilted her hips back so that his cock could delve the depths of her pleasure grotto.

Jie began to move faster and harder. He rose up on his hands and tilted his pelvis, changing his angle inside her. Each thrust of his dragon hit a sweet spot deep inside her and all she could do was lie still, surrender, her bones melting.

His cock twitched and surged inside her. She felt Jie was close to his climax and squeezed her inner muscles around him. The increased friction brought her over the edge. The tiny spasms erupted, shimmering through her moist cave. She cried out softly and clutched his hips. She felt him pulse inside her again. It aroused him when she came and he groaned, thrusting in quick strokes until his climax passed.

She levered up on her elbows and pressed her lips to his. His delicious musky scent invaded her and her eyes fluttered closed while she savored his lips and tongue.

Still buried inside her, Jie embraced her and lowered her onto her back beneath him. She smiled and toyed with his short hair while leisurely caressing his strong back. Mmm, there was never a time they made love that she didn't want to remain just like this forever.

She closed her eyes and breathed in Jie's unique scent, male and primal. Maybe he hadn't been changing each month since they'd been practicing the Dragon-Tigress exercises but that aroma, musky and wild, still emanated from deep inside him, a constant reminder of the beast who'd claimed her as his mate and then saved her life.

She sighed and pressed her lips into the damp, warm...mmm...masculine skin of Jie's neck. There was no way she would have let him go to China without her. She couldn't bear the thought of being apart from him when life had finally brought her true love to her. And true love he was to make her willing to overcome her fear of flying so that she could accompany him. When she'd watched Danny fall in love with Dave, his soul mate, she'd sworn to herself that if she found that kind of love, she'd do anything for it.

Well, now was the true test. She was not only about to make her first flight but it was to the other side of the world where she was going to meet Jie's first wife, a woman he'd loved before he loved her.

Meg held Jie tighter, relishing these few moments of quiet. The next few days were going to have little or no rest, full of getting her passport, packing and making

arrangements for the market to be cared for while she was gone. Hopefully Auntie Yee could help her. She couldn't afford to keep the store closed all the time she'd be gone.

So much to do, so many preparations to make when you were about to make the journey of a lifetime.

## **Chapter Eighteen**

*Police jail, Beijing*

Every time he slept, he dreamed of a beautiful woman. Not the woman who'd gotten him arrested. A different woman, with long hair the golden color of the dried prairie grasses that waved in the winds. Though he was colorblind, in his mind's eye, the he saw her vividly, in every detail. Her eyes, though almond shaped, like his own, were the rich green color of the prayer flags flying above the monastery and soft love shone in them when she smiled, not fear and hatred.

She reached her arms out to him in every dream. Her skin was pale and soft and her full breasts made him long to feel them against his cheek and lips. His entire body ached with the need to taste her, to bury himself deep inside her, to experience the healing balm of her love and softness. It was this woman he'd unknowingly craved each time his body made the painful transformation from man to beast and back again. Now, in his dreams, she was clear to him. For some mysterious reason, he knew he could bear it all, the pain and loneliness, the deep aching hunger, if he could touch her, feel her softness against him.

Each time he opened his eyes, he found himself on the thin mattress of his cot. No beautiful woman. All he could do was stare listlessly beyond the iron bars of the jail cell to the bit of sunlight coming through the window in the corridor. More than anything he wanted to rise up, to howl and struggle, to get the guards to open the doors so he could escape and find the beautiful woman from his dreams. But he couldn't. He had no energy. His *qi* was draining rapidly. Each day that passed, movement became more and more difficult and his heart ached in his chest. He didn't even change into the beast at night now. He couldn't, not without his vital life force. The essence that only the golden-haired woman in his dreams could give him.

All he could do was lie there and dream and stare out the window, hoping that somehow she'd find him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you all sure about this?" Meg looked from Danny to Dave to Auntie Yee, her heart pounding from anticipation. If anyone had better friends in the world than she did, she hadn't met that person yet.

They all looked back at her from their places at the round table. Seated upstairs at Shin Tao's, the restaurant where Dave and Danny had their first date, everyone important to her was gathered, having a farewell supper the night before she and Jie left.

"Of course we're sure, sweetheart," Dave said. "The campus is only a few stops on the T. I'll have time to help Yee close the store." He had just started fall classes at U. Mass, pursuing his bachelor's and then master's in social work.

"And I'll help her open," Danny added. He'd helped Meg and her grandfather at the market since she and Danny were in high school and Meg had complete confidence that Danny could handle anything that came up there. He knew every aspect of the business. However, he'd just gotten his doctorate in computer science the previous spring and was beginning to teach at MIT.

She looked at him. "You're just starting your new post, Danny. I hate asking you. And you're already taking care of Mei." Meg's fluffy Persian had gone to live with Danny and Dave because the cat was terrified of Jie, sensing the canine beast that was a part of his being. To take the stress off the poor feline, Danny had offered to have her live across the street in his apartment.

Danny leaned toward her and put his hand on her shoulder. "Meggie, it's no problem at all. This is a major trip for you and I won't have you worrying about a thing."

Auntie Yee smiled at her. "Danny is right," she said. "You know I helped Lem Kin for years. You have no worries. Just go and enjoy seeing the land your Lao Ye came from."

Meg couldn't hold back the tears that pooled in her eyes. She bowed her head. "Thank you so much. I have the best friends in the world."

"Yes, thank you all," Jie added softly.

Meg looked at him and smiled, grateful that he'd so easily become a part of her unconventional little family. She prayed that everything would work out in China and that he would still return with her and, hopefully, his godfather too.

\* \* \* \* \*

Early the next morning her friends gathered to see her and Jie off. The cab sat at the curb idling while Meg embraced Auntie Yee and Dave.

"Have a safe trip, sweetheart," Dave said, kissing her on the cheek. He wrapped her in a bear hug.

"Thank you, Dave." She squeezed him. "Take good care of Danny."

He released her and winked, his blue eyes twinkling. "You know I always do."

She smiled, feeling herself blush. "I know." In truth, Dave practically worshiped Danny. Meg had never seen someone fall so madly in love with another person as Dave had with Danny. In the short time he'd been with Danny, Dave had transformed from a man heavily burdened with sadness to a man who looked radiantly happy.

*Danny.* When the moment came to hug him goodbye, the tears welled up hard in her eyes. In eighteen years of friendship, they'd barely ever been apart. He'd gone away from her for brief periods of time when he had computer consulting jobs but she'd

never left home, always staying here at the market with her Lao Ye, waiting for Danny to return. Now, she didn't know how long she and Jie would be gone. Danny smiled gently at her and she could tell he felt a similar way. "You're going to have a wonderful time, Meggie," he said. "Don't forget to have some candied haws fresh off a cart." He winked at her. Danny had been to Beijing with his parents to visit family and he'd brought her back some of these apple treats saying that though you could get them in Chinatown, they weren't the same as off a street vendor's cart in the homeland.

She nodded, her throat suddenly tight. A tear rolled out onto her cheek. Danny pulled her into an embrace and squeezed her tight. "I'll miss you so much," he said.

Her throat loosened enough just enough to whisper a few words. "I'll miss you too."

Danny pressed a kiss into her hair. "Don't worry, Meggie, you're going to have an awesome experience. We'll be here when you get home, okay?"

She nodded against him, afraid to let him go.

Danny hugged her a few moments more, then gently ended the embrace. He brushed a tear off her cheek. "Don't want you to miss your flight." He smiled at her. "You look so pretty."

"You do look pretty," Jie said. He'd been standing near her, shaking hands with Dave and saying goodbye to Auntie Yee. Now, he caressed her back over the deep blue silk brocade *shou* blouse she wore. Her skin tingled pleasantly from his gentle yet strong touch and his praise sent pleasant heat through her. "Thank you."

"Now," Jie said, "we'd better go."

She nodded. "I'm ready." She looked at the market, at the sign that bore her grandfather's name, the place she'd spent nearly every day of her thirty years. This dwelling and its surroundings meant everything to her. Her grandfather had raised her here, the neighborhood where she and Danny had become best friends and where Jie had searched for her and become the great love of her life.

She looked at the small gathering of her friends and waved, smiling. "See you soon."

"We'll be here, Meggie," Danny said. "We love you."

Dave winked at her and Auntie Yee wiped at her tears with a handkerchief.

"I love you too," she called as Jie ushered her into the cab and slid into the backseat beside her. She waved at her friends through the window until the cab had rounded the corner, then turned and moved in closer to Jie, snuggling into the comforting crook of his arm.

He held her snugly against his side and leaned down, placing a soft kiss on her cheek. "Thank you, Meg," he murmured. "I know what it means to you, taking this trip with me."

She looked up at him. His compassion then had touched her and moved her even more deeply in this moment. She kissed his lips softly. "I wouldn't have let you go without me."

\* \* \* \* \*

The tension in Meg's body increased the closer they came to the actual flight. Her heart pounded and her stomach fluttered. She felt cold and fought to keep her teeth from chattering, even though the September day was pleasantly warm.

Jie was sensitive to her distress and kept his arm linked through hers as much as possible while they checked the suitcase they shared through to Beijing and received their seat assignments.

Her nervousness rose to a pitch going through security. The noise and throng of the airport, the people everywhere, restaurants and magazine shops, all blurred in her vision.

They walked to the gate for their flight and Jie led her to a seat, never releasing her arm as they sat down to wait. Meg had a book to read tucked in her flight bag and tried to read a few pages but her mind raced so badly she couldn't concentrate on the words. Her heartbeat rose faster and faster as memories of the day her parents left surfaced in her mind.

Her breath started to come in small gasps. Jie reached for her hand, lacing their fingers together. He peered at her, his brow furrowed. "Meg, you don't have to do this, you know. I would never force you." His voice was gentle, soothing.

She stared back at him, finding her gaze trapped by his eyes, by their beautiful almond shape and rich brown color under the heavy fringe of lashes. He never broke their joined gazes and the melting depths of his eyes filled her with growing calm. "No," she said in a near whisper. "I want to go with you. I just have some...bad memories coming up."

Jie squeezed her hand and brought it to his lips. He pressed a soft kiss into her skin, his eyes never leaving her face. "I'm here for you, Meg. I'll help you." He leaned in a bit closer. "Don't worry, *ai ren*, by the time our second flight comes, you'll be completely unconcerned. Besides, that long flight will give us the perfect opportunity to continue our exercises."

She looked at him. "Exercises? You mean..." Her cheeks tingled as the understanding of what Jie meant seeped in. She couldn't finish for the erotic pulsing that sprang up between her legs.

He winked. "Exactly."

"Oh." She looked straight ahead, her fear calmed for the moment. His touch and words dispelled the images of hearing her parents had died, of her climbing onto her grandfather's lap, clinging to him as she wet his shirt with her tears.

She smiled at Jie, then leaned over and kissed his cheek.

They waited another quarter of an hour before their flight was announced. Jie kept hold of her hand, his fingers laced through hers. He held her firmly against him as they walked down the passageway and boarded the plane. Jie gave her his aisle seat so she wouldn't feel crowded and settled in beside her. She sat, one hand gripping Jie's hand, the other her armrest while she watched the other passengers board.

Conversation hummed leisurely around them and the flight attendants assisted people here and there, smiling and courteous. No one besides her seemed in the least concerned that anything bad would happen, as if flying on an airplane were as mundane a thing to do as sweeping the floor or having a meal.

"Meg." Jie's soft voice caused her to turn and her gaze once again got captured in his beautiful brown eyes. He smiled. "I'm proud of you."

She managed to smile back. The calm demeanor of the people around her, including the man she loved, largely soothed her fear. "Thank you."

The captain announced the impending takeoff. The noise of engines increased and the airplane vibrated. Passengers settled into their seats and Meg heard the clicking sound of seatbelts around her. She squeezed Jie's hand, grateful for his calm energy seeping into her. The jet began to roll slowly backward, away from the terminal. Meg closed her eyes, feeling the movement of the giant machine in which she sat. Her heart thrashed.

Suddenly, she felt Jie's lips touch her cheek. He lifted away and then pushed his shoulder snugly against hers, both his hands holding one of hers, making her feel safe. It was his touch and steady presence beside her that took the frightening edge off the takeoff. The plane rolled slowly until it reached a certain point, at which the captain announced the takeoff and then it moved again, taxiing ahead with gathering speed.

Meg gripped Jie's hand, working to breathe deeply as the plane hurtled forward. The grinding of the landing gears rising into the belly of the plane stopped and they seemed to shoot into the air, soaring at an angle. Her ears popped like crazy as they climbed. She swallowed each time, relieving the pressure in her ears until the plane leveled off and the captain announced that the passengers could move around the cabin if needed.

She heaved a deep sigh of relief and glanced around her. Their fellow passengers were reading and carrying on conversations as if nothing out of the ordinary at all were happening. The flight attendants too, some of them pretty women and a couple of men, were making their way down the aisles serving drinks from a cart.

Jie turned to her, smiling. "You did it, Meg."

Tears flooded her eyes. "Because of you," she whispered.

Her words moved him, his dark eyes getting that liquid sheen. He leaned over and kissed her lips again before settling back against his seat, still holding her hand.

The plane moved smoothly through the air, hitting a small bump now and then. Overall, however, Meg found the experience not nearly as terrifying as she'd imagined it. For her, it was because Jie was beside her, holding her hand and turning to her every

few minutes to smile at her and press a kiss into her hair. He was truly, for all his stubbornness and self-criticism, one of the kindest people she'd ever met.

Only a few minutes seemed to pass before the captain announced the flight's descent into New York. Between chatting with Jie, having a glass of sparkling water and reading her book, the short flight from Boston was over. Meg's attention got captured in watching the land below through the window. Even though she was on the aisle she still had a clear view of the buildings and roads which appeared like miniatures, grow larger, and she realized moments later she'd completely forgotten to be afraid. By the time she and Jie had disembarked and found their connecting flight at the Air China gate terminal, her fear dissipated and she found herself looking forward to the rest of the journey.

When their connecting flight to Beijing was called to board, Meg rose from her seat in the terminal and slipped her hand again into Jie's, realizing for the first time the magnitude of the journey he'd made months ago to come to her. She squeezed his hand and when he looked down at her, her heart tingled and burst with deep affection.

"Are you all right, Meg?" His brown eyes radiated concern.

She smiled at him. "I'm fine. I just came to understand a bit of what you went through coming to America to find me."

To her surprise, the depths of his eyes misted over. They had reached the attendant at the door who took their boarding passes and absently he handed the card to the woman, his gaze not leaving Meg's. Meg too, handed over her pass, received the stub and went with Jie into the corridor. He kissed her cheek, the small gesture conveying more than he could with words in that moment.

When they took their seats and settled in, Jie turned to her again. "This is a very long flight," he said. "Nothing like the one from Boston to New York." His smile deepened and he leaned in to her, his mouth close to her ear. "Remember what I said about continuing our Dragon-Tigress practice," he whispered.

Meg caught her breath. She remembered. The erotic promise sent a tingle through her body. His statement only begged one question. "But...how?"

Jie's eyes sparkled in an uncharacteristically mischievous way. He was so serious most of the time. "You'll see." He pressed a deliciously soft kiss onto her lips and then sat back in his seat, his hand still joined with hers.

Whispers of arousal spiraled through her body. Jie had given her something wonderful to look forward to. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, practicing some of the deep breathing her grandfather had shown her so long ago when he'd taught her and Danny *tai chi*. The breathing brought relaxation and she let her mind rest on her anticipation of what Jie had planned for them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Several hours into the flight Jie turned to her. "Are you ready?" he asked softly.

Meg had taken off her earphones long before he spoke because the in-flight movie being shown was not very interesting. She looked at him. "Ready?"

Then she saw the simmering hunger in his eyes and remembered his erotic promise of earlier. Her body immediately tingled to life. She nodded. "Yes."

He undid his seatbelt and rose from the seat. "Come."

Meg's heart flip-flopped as she undid her own seatbelt and stepped into the aisle, images of Jie's hands on her bare skin already strong in her mind. There was never a time before she and Jie made love that she did not experience flutters of anticipation. Being with him was the most delicious thing she'd ever known but such deep intimacy with a man still brought up the nervous girl who'd only had one failed relationship long before Jie found her. Only now, with his love, was she beginning to find some confidence.

She followed him down the aisle to the back of the plane where the lavatories were. Two of the four were vacant. Jie opened one of the doors. A tiny grin teased at his full lips and he gestured with a nod of his head.

Meg's cheeks burned slightly and she looked over her shoulder as if someone were watching them. Wordlessly, she stepped into the tiny lavatory and turned. Her breath hitched softly when she realized Jie was following her into the tiny cubicle. She made room for him by pressing against the wall.

His muscular body occupied most of the remaining space and he latched the door. The tiny room filled quickly with their combined body heat and Meg immediately felt delightfully tipsy, as if she'd drunk warm plum wine.

Jie turned and took her in his arms, pulling her close. "How are you doing, *ai ren*?" he murmured over the thrum of the engine.

Meg rested her cheek against his hard chest, breathing in his musky scent. It felt strange, crowded here in this tiny bathroom but just holding Jie made any setting, for her, romantic. She slipped her hands around his back, tracing the outlines of chiseled muscle through the thin material of his t-shirt with hungry fingertips. Her body was already melting against his hard physique. "I'm much better now."

Jie's breathing grew heavier and he nuzzled the side of her neck with his lips. "Are you ready for me to harvest your yin?"

The whispered question almost made her moan and she felt moisture already begin to gather in her core. "Yes," she breathed.

Gently he turned her around in his arms, then pulled her back against him. Meg caught her breath at the hard nudge of his cock in her backside. He ran his hands sensuously over her breasts, giving extra attention to her nipples. He circled his fingertips over them and they hardened, even through her bra and her silk blouse. Behind her, the hard push of his erection nestled into the crevice of her buttocks and he rocked his hips against her, pressing his cock more deeply into her softness.

She tilted her head to one side, silently offering her neck to his lips. Just then, the plane lurched. Meg gasped and lurched backward. Jie's hard body met hers like a

protective wall. Icy heat traveled down her arms and her heart raced. She clutched at his jeans and pressed back hard against him. His body was a warm, solid wall and she leaned heavily on his reassuring strength.

He embraced her in a protective hold. "It's all right, Meg," he said close to her ear. "Just turbulence. Nothing to worry about at all." He held her firmly against him and stroked her hair.

Meg tilted her head back, eyes closed and rested against him, breathing deeply until her fear began to pass.

Jie pressed a soft kiss on the side of her neck. His warm breath and full lips made her skin tingle pleasantly. He nibbled her earlobe, sending a delightful shiver down her body. "I'll make you forget your fear," he murmured. His breath tickled her ear in the most sensual way. Behind her, he pressed his hard dragon into her backside and ground slow, erotic circles against the crevice of her buttocks.

She could feel his erection straining, pushing against her and the sensation began to replace her fear. God, he made her feel so beautiful, so wanted. Her fear melted away more and more with each grind of his pelvis and her body heated up again.

Jie slid one hand under her blouse. His touch, gentle and strong, sent a pleasant shiver through her. "You like that?" he whispered, sliding his fingertips in lazy circles over her rib cage. His touch sent a heated trail along the sensitive underside of her breasts.

"Yes." She sighed. She sank back against him, her eyes closed. Around them, the motor vibrated through the small compartment.

"Imagine there are people on the other side of the door," he murmured. He slid his hand over one breast, cupping it in his warm palm. "What if they could see us?" He rolled her nipple between thumb and forefinger, pressed down with teasing firmness.

She gasped. Tingling heat shot through her nipple, tightening it to a hard nub under Jie's fingertips. To her surprise, Jie's suggestion about being watched sent a frisson of heat straight into her pussy and she found herself grinding her backside against Jie's cock while he moved his hand to her other breast and slipped his fingers under the thin lacy cup of her bra.

"Ohhh," She sighed deeply and arched her back. All thoughts dissipated under Jie's touch.

He pinched and kneaded her bare nipple between his fingertips. His breath pulsed warmly on her neck, heightening her arousal and she tilted her head, offering herself fully to his lips.

He feathered soft kisses on her skin, coaxing her body to higher and higher tension, as the Dragon-Tigress practice demanded. The warm soft slide of his tongue upward toward her ear made her moan and she reached down with both hands, caressing the hardness of his thigh muscles through his jeans.

Jie nibbled delicately at her earlobe, tugging it between his lips and tongue. His breath, heavy with arousal, warmed and tickled her ear. "Meg," he whispered, then pinched her nipples in gentle, rhythmic tugs.

The pleasure was overwhelming. "Please, Jie."

With a light scrape of his teeth, Jie released her earlobe. He chuckled softly and ground his cock hard against her buttocks. "You're not quite ready," he murmured, still in a teasing tone. With that, he pulled his hands out from underneath her blouse and began to work open the frog buttons.

Meg sighed. Her blouse fell open and Jie unlatched the front hook of her bra, releasing her aching breasts, which he immediately cupped in both hands.

He kissed the side of her neck again, one quick soft kiss and then began the circling exercise around her breasts, this time not lifting his hands completely away. His fingertips brushed the swells and the hard tips of her nipples tenderly with each movement. Slowly, torturously, he made the seventy-two rounds in each direction until her yin cave throbbed in its swollen ache for release. She could feel her juices, what Jie called her *yin* dew, soaking her panties and she moaned softly, rubbing her backside against his hard cock through his jeans.

Jie groaned softly near her ear. "You're ready now, Meg," he whispered, voice tight with obvious need. He pushed her breasts together, squeezed them gently before sliding his thumbs and index fingers around her nipples. He pinched them in an easy pulsing rhythm that sent shoots of tingling pleasure straight into her clit. With each squeeze of his fingertips, another surge of yin dew seeped from her core. She needed desperately for him to release the buildup of pressure.

Jie turned her again until she faced him. He put the seat down on the toilet and sat before her, pulling her gently toward him. Tilting his face up, he took one nipple in his mouth and sucked with hot licks of his tongue while rolling the other one between gentle fingertips. Alternately he sucked and tugged the hardened bud while Meg supported her sagging weight with her hand on the tiny counter and sink.

Jie lifted his mouth from her breast. He looked so incredibly sexy, his full soft lips moist, his eyelids heavy, his golden skin flushed. He lifted the hem of her skirt and bunched it around her waist. "Hold this," he said, his smooth voice husky.

She obeyed and lifted the skirt so that it was clear of her lacy silk panties. Immediately she saw his dark appreciative look on her sex.

"You're so beautiful, Meg," he breathed. With his gentle doctor's hands he caressed her stomach, brushed his fingertips just above the low waistband of her silk panties until he found the spot between her navel and pubic mound. Softly he pressed down.

Meg caught her breath at the surge of energy into her womb and breasts. There were special names for these spots, Jie had told her in earlier practice, but when he touched her, she forgot them, as she did everything else except the erotic contact of his gentle, skilled hands. Warm heat washed through her clit and she moaned, unable to do anything except close her eyes and tilt her head back.

"You're more than ready now," he breathed. "My love, always so full of life for me." He traced the contours of her lower lips through her thin lacy panties, now saturated with her juices.

Meg's eyelids shuttered at the pleasure but his other hand on her buttocks supported her weight while he continued to caress her slit. Just when she thought she'd go mad with teasing, Jie slid two fingers under the material and found her clit, rubbing it tenderly in tiny circles.

She was about to beg him for his mouth when he took hold of the elastic and slid her panties over her hips, down her thighs to her knees. His face was so close to her moist core that she could feel his breath pulse warmly over the swollen, aching part of her, desperate for release.

He slid his warm hands over her hips, reached around and cupped her buttocks. With a gentle pull, he drew her gently forward. His brown gaze rested on her open glistening folds and his pupils simmered with want. He leaned into her and pressed a soft kiss into the spot he'd touched moments before with his fingertips.

Meg moaned softly. There was nothing better in the whole world than Jie's touch and kiss. He licked across that spot. Back and forth, teasingly and then with more pressure, he sent feathers of moist warmth across her skin with his tongue, weakening her, making her eyes flutter closed and her breath come in panting beats. Her toes curled inside her shoes, her bones felt like liquid and she gripped his strong shoulders to anchor her sagging weight. "Oh, Jie" Never did she feel as glorious as when he was making love to her.

He groaned softly at the sound of his name and slipped the thumbs of both hands along her lower lips, spreading them gently apart. The movement revealed the opening of her moist cave to his gaze and to his mouth.

She dragged in a breath as Jie's touch invaded her. He slipped his thumbs easily inside her, filling her and massaged the inner walls with careful, skilled strokes.

Energy swirled freely through her entire body now, as it always did when he did these amazing things to her. She slid her hands into his sleek hair and tilted her pelvis, silently begging him for his mouth. The first stroke of his hot tongue across her clit nearly sent her over the edge. Lightly she grasped his hair but it was too short to grip so she splayed her fingers over his skull, caressed his head in small circles, matching the rhythm of his tongue and fingers on her most sensitive spots.

One hand slid to his cheek and down and she could feel the tiny muscles working in his jaw as he licked and sucked her. Each tug of his tongue and lips on her yin pearl coaxed her body closer and closer to the release she craved so badly.

She heard him murmur, felt the small vibration against her clit. She touched his throat, felt the muscles working as if he were swallowing. Jie was drinking in her yin dew. She sensed it filling his mouth, sliding down his throat, making him stronger.

She tilted her hips upward, giving him as complete access as she was able in the tiny space. With his hands on her buttocks, he pulled her closer, more tightly against his

face. He tugged her pearl between his lips and tongue and sucked several times in rapid succession. Her entire body clenched and the orgasm spilled through her. She squeezed her eyes shut, her consciousness trapped in those few moments of bliss as all the tension drained, leaving a languid satisfaction in its place.

Jie held her in place so she wouldn't fall back in her weakened state. He pressed his cheek to her abdomen, breathing heavily. She felt the tension of need still coiled in his hands as he held her. The scent of her musk permeated the air.

When some of her strength had seeped back in, she caressed Jie's hair and cheeks, traced his lips, moist and slick from her juices. She thought of what Auntie Yee had told her long ago, that the act of sexual love between a man and a woman was a give and take of yin and yang. That the woman gave the man her yin and then in turn, received the man's yang. That way both partners fulfilled each other, strengthened their *qi*, their life force and achieved harmony.

Now it was her turn to receive Jie's masculine force as well as to pleasure him. She smiled down at him, feeling relaxed, harmonious and free of the cares she'd had when she boarded the plane. With her fingertips under his jaw, she tilted his face up and smiled at him. "It's your turn," she said, just loudly enough to be heard over the engine.

Jie returned her smile and rose to his feet. He embraced her, pulled her close, then pressed a kiss to her lips, sharing with her the muskiness from her sex that clung to his lips. Jie's kiss was as deeply intimate as everything they did together. She loved the feel and taste of his lips and tongue and the way he conveyed to her how much he loved her through his kiss. He was a good man and she loved his soul, the essence of which came through when their mouths joined.

While they kissed, she tugged on his belt buckle. By feel only she worked it open and then undid the button and zipper. His erection sprang free, jutted out towards her. Still swirling her tongue against his, she pushed his jeans past his hips and cupped his cock. She caressed it, soft gentle strokes that allowed her to appreciate the velvety texture of the skin and hard, veined muscle. Jie moaned softly into her mouth and pushed his hips forward, pressing his cock more snugly against her palm.

He rested his hands on her upper arms and maneuvered her so that she could sit where he'd been. When they were turned around, he pulled away from their kiss and bade her to sit. He was panting heavily and his erection jutted close to her face as if demanding her mouth.

She reached out and touched it, slid her fingertips up the smooth veined shaft. Jie groaned softly and his cock twitched as if it had a life of its own. She felt his tension, the restrained hunger in his body that told her he too, was now desperate for relief from the buildup of his yang force.

She pulled her mouth from their kiss and sank down, drew his body to her with a light grip on his narrow hips. As he'd done to her, she pressed her lips to his tight stomach, and breathed in his feral scent, which pervaded her soul. She closed her eyes, reveling in Jie's hot maleness.

She parted her lips and tasted the bare flesh of his taut stomach. Jie's smooth golden skin pleased her taste buds with its tangy warmth. She slid her hands around his lower back, her fingertips skimming the ridges of muscle and massaged the sleek skin of his hips as she took his velvety shaft into her mouth.

Mmm... Gently she tasted him, taking his length deeper, bit by bit, delighting in his musky flavor against her tongue and the sounds of his quiet groans as she moved her mouth. One of her hands rested on his hip while the other gently cupped his balls. Tenderly she squeezed them as she sucked him.

She took him in as deeply as she could, then pulled back, swirling her tongue over the hard lobes of the head. A drop of seed beaded at the tiny opening and she sucked it off, savored the salty-sweet tang of Jie's essence.

Jie groaned. "Meg, yes," he rasped in a tight whisper.

His obvious appreciation spurred her on and she wanted to give every ounce of pleasure she could to the man who'd come into her life, shared all her burdens with her, become a dear friend and lover, and made her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

She sucked his hard dragon tighter in her mouth, increased the speed and depth of her movements. His cock pulsed in her mouth, pressed deliciously on her tongue. She knew his body so well now, she felt his release only moments away. She pulled back, slid her lips almost to the very tip and then pushed forward and took him deep into her mouth in one hard slide.

Jie groaned and erupted, tiny pulsations that released his seed inside her mouth.

She accepted his yang offering, swallowed his delicious essence, her hands now anchored on his buttocks as she took him deep inside.

Jie's fingers tightened in her hair. He groaned softly with each spurt of his climax.

She loved the sounds he made and kept the light suction of her lips on his cock until he was empty.

"Oh, Meg," he whispered again. Gently he pulled back. His dragon slipped from her mouth and she looked up, unable to suppress a smile.

He leaned his sagging weight against the tiny counter, breathing heavily.

She gazed at his flushed skin and heavy lids, the way he panted and felt ridiculously pleased, knowing she'd brought him to this state. She rose from her seat and kissed him. Their intimate flavors mingled in the moist warmth of their mouths.

Jie wrapped her in his strong arms and rested his cheek against hers. "Thank you, Meg," he whispered.

The tang of his seed remained on her tongue while they hugged. She closed her eyes and rested against him, his hard muscles warm. The heat from their loving radiated through his clothing onto her breasts, still bared from when he'd unlatched her bra.

Only then did she become aware again of their surroundings. The motors hummed and vibrated through the small space, reminding her they were in the plane lavatory. She couldn't help smiling to herself. Before Jie, something this wonderful, this erotic would never have happened to her.

Finally, when they were rested, they maneuvered in the tiny space, worked around each other to do up their clothing. Once dressed, Jie took her in his arms again and nuzzled her hair. "Now," he said softly, "we should both try to get some sleep." His hand slipped into her hair, cradling her head. "As soon as we get to the hotel and settle in, I have to contact Su Lin."

Meg sighed. "I know." She wished she could just enjoy the languorous aftermath of their lovemaking without the specter of meeting Jie's ex-wife hovering. She was tempted to ask Jie to just let it go, not to bother defending himself. But she knew how guilty he felt and how important it was that he was cleared of Su Lin's accusation.

She let her thoughts wander to the stranger whom Su Lin thought was Jie. A strange tingle shimmered down her spine. Who was this man who looked so much like Jie that Su Lin thought he was her ex-husband? As a woman, she felt she would know Jie anywhere, even if he'd changed physically and she hadn't seen him in a long time. She had taken Jie into her body and heart. He was imprinted on her very soul, as no doubt, he was on Su Lin's. That thought made jealousy simmer deep in her gut, relieved only by Jie's tender adoration.

Jealousy aside, the truth remained. There was something strange going on—though it couldn't possibly be more bizarre than the fact that the man she loved changed from a man into a wolf-like beast at every full moon. They would obviously have to see this mysterious stranger and Jie would need to identify him while they were in Beijing in order to prove to Su Lin and to the authorities that he had been in the United States at the time of the stranger's arrest.

"What are you thinking, Meg?" Jie's gentle tenor cut through her musings.

She looked at him. Guilt snaked through her for all her private thoughts. She searched her heart for the words she really wanted to say. Now was no time to express fear and jealousy. "I was thinking how much I want everything to work out."

He rested his hands on her shoulders and nodded. "Me too," he murmured.

Jie left the lavatory first and she followed him after washing her face and smoothing and repinning her mussed hair. Then she went out and took her seat next to Jie, trying to get some rest with her hand laced in his.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

*Moscow, Russia*

"In local news tonight, the search for missing mafia leader Ivan Schenko has ended. The body of Moscow's most notorious gangster and the owner of Club Sascha, a favorite nightspot, was found early this morning in a field outside the city. Autopsy reports claim a wolf attack as cause of death. Piotr Yelin has replaced Schenko as the leader of the —"

Blind anger roared in Boris' ears, drowning out the rest of the news report.

"Hey, Schenko," a fellow prisoner called from his seat in the recreation room, "Sorry about your brother." Sarcasm dripped from his voice. Ivan had not been popular.

Another prisoner guffawed. "Yeah, my condolences."

Boris growled at both of them. Had they not been in prison he would have changed and ripped the guys limb from limb. He scowled at the screen, which now showed an image of that slimy little Ukrainian bastard. No way that little wimp had defeated his brother in a fight for the Moscow alpha seat. Even from this prison rec room, Boris smelled a major, putrid rat.

Had his parole not been coming up in three days' time, he would have ripped the television set off the wall and thrown it to the floor. Now he understood why Ivan hadn't come to visit him since he'd told Boris he was going on an errand in the United States. Ivan hadn't given him details but if he had, Boris would certainly have railed against Ivan's having anything to do with that little ass sucker, Yelin. Sometimes the ones who were physically the weakest were the craftiest and the most dangerous.

Boris forced himself to calm down. He lit a cigarette and puffed it while he planned his first activity when he got out of prison. No one took Ivan's seat as alpha and got away with it. Especially not the fucker who'd killed Boris' twin, his last living relative in the world...

\* \* \* \* \*

Jie opened his eyes sometime later to find Meg's cheek resting against his shoulder. Through the window, the first hints of dawn were beginning to lighten the night sky. The plane was quiet, cutting smoothly through the night and most of the passengers were snoozing or sitting quietly reading, some with headphones for music or the movie.

The feel of Meg against him sent a surge of pleasure and possessiveness through him as it always did. Not wanting to disturb her rest, he resisted the urge to lean down and kiss her head. He was more grateful than words could ever express for her

company. The fact that she'd been willing to overcome a lifelong fear just to come on this trip with him was an honor, especially when he knew she'd not been able to do that for her boyfriend years ago who'd moved from Boston to San Francisco.

The truth was, he needed Meg with him so very badly, especially because he was returning to Beijing, the city where his parents had been murdered. Meg's soft comfort and her faith in him went a long way toward soothing the horrid ache he experienced from his memories. No doubt, once he laid eyes on the city where so much suffering had befallen him, he'd need Meg's comfort more than he'd ever needed anything else in his life, aside from his godfather's love.

How he'd been able to attend medical school in that city and to live there with Su Lin he couldn't begin to understand. It was as if by remaining in Hell, he'd been punishing himself for a crime he'd committed—his crimes of anger, envy and arrogance. For the crime of hating his parents for leaving him so many times alone up in Xiahe, for making their students more important than they'd made him, only to die before he'd had a chance to love them.

And now, because of this crazy accusation Su Lin was making, he not only had to return to Beijing but he'd have to spend time there, walk the achingly familiar streets, face a woman who hated him. Granted, he'd not been as tender and loving with Su Lin as he was with Meg. Meg brought something out in him no other woman ever had. Yet he'd tried to be the best husband possible and because he'd wanted to treat Tibetans equally with Han Chinese in their joint practice, she'd ended up hating him anyway.

The flight attendants moved down the aisles, serving a small breakfast. The scent of coffee wafted through the cabin, rousing his appetite. Meg stirred and raised her head.

He smiled at her, loving even the sleepiness in her green eyes. "Did you sleep well, *ai ren*?"

She returned his smile and nodded, straightening up in her seat just as the flight attendant approached their row. "I think so." She leaned into him and kissed him on the lips. Lifting one hand to his cheek, she stroked it, her fingertips rasping over the light stubble on his jaw. "How are you?"

The tension in his gut eased a bit from her gentle concern. Before he'd met her, he hadn't known anyone so gentle, with the exception of his godfather. Entering Meg's world and meeting her and her friend Danny had been like finding a wondrous haven of people who valued kindness and friendship above everything else. Getting on this plane to return to China, even to fetch Master Li, had been one of the most difficult things he'd done in a very long time, more difficult even than fighting the Russian *lang ren*. "With you here, I'm fine," he said softly.

They spent the remainder of the thirteen-and-a half-hour flight discussing over breakfast what was going to happen when they arrived in Beijing and then sitting quietly together, reading, holding hands.

It was already past six in the evening when the 747 touched down. They retrieved their luggage, went through customs and got into a cab to take them the forty-minute drive to the hotel.

Jie was content to watch Meg observe her new surroundings as the taxi left the airport and took the expressway toward the main part of the city. He needed so much to see Beijing through her eyes, through the eyes of someone who loved him and for whom the place was new and exciting.

Meg remained quiet. Although her gaze seemed captured by the endless blocks of stores, new shiny office and apartment buildings that had replaced many of the historical neighborhoods and marketplaces, her enthusiasm was obviously tempered. She didn't ooh and ahh or even comment. She just silently watched the city pass by the car windows and he sensed that her reserve was out of respect for his emotions.

Moved by her thoughtfulness, he squeezed her hand. "What do you think of Beijing, Meg?"

She looked at him, her eyes appearing strained from travel and emotional tension. A tiny smile curved her lips and she returned the gentle squeeze of his hand. "I don't know yet," she said softly.

*Fair enough.* He, himself, wasn't crazy about what the city had become. Much of its historical and community-oriented flavor was now lost in the maze of shiny new high-rise office and apartment buildings. His old neighborhood too, had been razed before he left, in the name of technology. He'd been to cities like Paris and Venice whose unique character remained intact despite progress, finding them absolutely enchanting. Silently, he promised to himself that when all their problems were ironed out, or at least most of them, he would take Meg to those romantic places.

By the time the taxi pulled up in front of the Shangri-La Hotel, they were both travel weary and in need of supper. It was well after eight in the evening and Jie decided that he could wait at least until they'd settled in and had something to eat before he tried to call Su Lin. He hoped she hadn't moved in the five years since their divorce because the phone number to their old apartment was the only one he had for her. He'd left her everything in the divorce, the apartment and their practice, taking only his own savings that had gotten him through the last five years and had enabled him to help his godfather.

Jie tipped the driver and carried his and Meg's one suitcase into the hotel. She stayed at his side while they checked in and then went up the elevator to their room. The room itself was beautifully decorated, modern and clean, with a small seating area by the window and a huge king-sized bed all in neutral tones.

Meg set down her travel bag and sank onto the mattress, looking tired.

Glad that they were finally alone, Jie sat close beside her, wildly pleased when she rested her cheek on his shoulder.

"Danny and Dave were very kind to give us this gift," he said. "When you speak to Danny, please thank him for me."

Danny and Dave had booked a room for them as a gift. Danny had chosen the Haidan District for them to stay because it was close to where Jie would have to go to see Su Lin but also so that Meg might have a chance to see the Summer Palace with its views of Kunming Lake and Yu Quan Hill with the background of mountains in the distance.

Meg reached up and caressed his chest over his t-shirt. "I certainly will." She pressed a soft kiss into his shoulder then looked up, smiling. "I don't think that trip could have been any longer, could it?"

He cupped her cheek. "No. But you were wonderful." He brushed his lips tenderly across hers then smoothed his hand down her back, loving the slide of silk against his hand.

Meg arched her back underneath his palm and closed her eyes. "Mmm," she murmured. "I was hoping we could take a shower before we do anything else."

Her words sent a thrill of heat straight into his groin. His dragon stirred and began its venture upward. It seemed he was never too tired for that. "Absolutely."

Meg was already working open the frog buttons of her blouse.

Suddenly hungry to feel her breasts in his hands, Jie pushed Meg's blouse off her shoulders. His gaze rested on the soft, pale swells of flesh and hard tips visible under the silky material of her bra. He reached out and brushed his fingertips down the inviting path of skin between her breasts. "You're so beautiful," he whispered.

Meg blinked. Every time he praised her like that, he saw her blend of surprise and gratitude. She didn't see what an incredible, luscious woman she was. "Thank you," she said softly. Her breathing deepened a bit under his touch.

He traced the swell of her breast over her bra then reached out and worked open the tiny latch. Her full breasts sprang free of their restraint. The creamy swells never failed to make his dragon breathe fire. The burgeoning hardness pushed against his jeans, hungry to sheath itself in Meg's moist cave.

He covered her breasts with both hands and squeezed them. Her erect nipples pushed deliciously into his palms and his mouth already watered to taste the light musky flavor of the rubbery soft tips.

A sudden vision caused him to freeze. His breath caught. The strangest sensation came over him, as if he weren't the one touching Meg. An image rose in his mind, pushing at his consciousness with incredible strength. A man, looking much like himself, as if he were a twin, caressed Meg's breasts. The man's hair reached to his shoulders. His chin and jaw were covered with a beard and he gazed at Meg with longing and hunger that shook Jie to his core.

Energy jolted through Jie's hands and traveled up his arms. He released Meg as if she'd burned him.

She started as if the jolt had gone through her too. Her eyes were wide and shock replaced the heated desire that had been there a moment before. "Jie, what was that? What happened?"

Jie blinked several times and raked his fingers through his hair. The strange energy still cascaded through his body as if a million tiny insects crawled on his skin. "I don't know."

Meg leaned toward him, reached out gingerly and touched his arm. Her touch tingled weirdly and on reflex, he pulled away. The tingling still invaded his body. Strangely, the sensation was not unpleasant, merely unsettling because it was unlike anything he'd ever experienced in his life, almost stranger even than the change from man to beast.

She frowned. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head, a swirl of emotions roiling inside him. "I'm all right." Sudden concern for her struck him in the wake of his strange behavior. "You're not hurt?"

"No. Just concerned."

He swiped a hand over his face and sighed. "Just tired from the journey and distressed, I suppose."

Meg nodded, a relieved, yet sympathetic expression on her face. She rose from the bed. "I understand. Me too." She slipped her blouse and bra off the rest of the way, pulled off her shoes and undid the button and zipper of her skirt. Slipping off her panties, she stood naked in front of him. "Come on," she said, enticing him with her soft curves and firm ripe swells of buttocks, hips and thighs. "I'll scrub your back." She smiled at him and then turned, moving quietly toward the bathroom. Her nearly waist-length hair fell in soft waves down her back and over her shoulders.

Jie stared at her until she disappeared into the bathroom. He shook his head, his body tingling. If her friend Danny hadn't been so wildly in love with a man, Jie would never have believed he hadn't made love to this luscious woman.

He saw the light go on and heard the shower running in the next moment. The only thing as enticing as Meg's naked body was Meg's naked body dripping with water, her skin even softer than usual when the water slicked it down.

That thought caused him to slip off his shoes, rise, shrug out of his t-shirt and yank off his jeans and briefs. As he went toward the bathroom, a memory of the man with long hair and beard rose in his mind. The image touched off that same surge of energy as before.

Meg smiled up at him as he stepped into the shower and pressed his body lightly to hers. Of course, she looked as delicious as ever, her water-darkened hair slicked down, water beading off her pale skin. It didn't take two whole seconds for his cock to rise and harden against her soft mound of wet curls. He put his hands on her slick upper arms and tilted his head down, touched his lips to her damp neck.

*Bam!* The image again. Energy coursed through Jie's body. He stepped away, his back against the cold, wet shower tiles.

Meg frowned, her eyes wide. "Jie," she murmured, just audible above the sound of the shower spray.

He heaved a deep breath. The tingling energy pulsed through every nerve ending of his skin. He held up a hand, meant to reassure Meg. He didn't want her to feel at fault. She wasn't making this image appear. "I'm all right, Meg. It...happened again." He didn't want to say that it happened when he touched her. "I love you."

She tilted her head, still watching him. Her eyes were soft. "*Wo ai ni*," she said softly. *I love you*. She reached for a fluffy washcloth, lathered it with soap and began wiping it over his back, rubbing in luxurious circles.

Jie rested his hands against the tiles and surrendered to her washing. The energy pulsed and tingled through his skin but the image of the man only rose when her bare hand touched him. His heart grew heavy again. Would he now be deprived of Meg's loving touch, the one thing that brought him comfort amidst his troubles?

"Jie." Meg's voice cut through his distress.

He turned and looked at her, still pressing his hands to the wall. "Yes?"

"Maybe you should rest...get a good night's sleep before calling Su Lin."

He considered her suggestion a moment then shook his head. If this strange image was rising in response to the trouble with Su Lin, which he suspected it was, it was best to get it over with. "No, Meg. I must call her tonight. After supper."

\* \* \* \* \*

Meg stepped out of the shower, working to push the worry away as she took a towel and handed another one to Jie. He wouldn't speak of what exactly was happening to him but, no doubt, it was somehow a response to being back in Beijing.

In silence, she dried off and went back into the room to open the suitcase for a fresh change of clothing. Judging from how fancy this hotel was, the modern elegance of the lobby, she'd feel out of place if she didn't wear one of her silk *cheongsam* dresses to dinner.

She chose the dark green *cheongsam*, the one she'd worn to Danny's graduation from MIT when he'd received his doctorate. She slipped into it, always loving the feel of the silk firmly hugging her curves. She also knew that Jie liked to look at her in this type of dress and after what had happened just before and during their shower, she was feeling insecure. They were both tired from more than a whole day of straight traveling and Jie was probably responding to fatigue, but she couldn't help wanting to attract his desire.

She brushed out her hair and worked it into a soft bun before slipping her feet into low-heeled pumps. Jie had remained in the bathroom, shaving but when he came out and saw her, appreciation radiated in his dark gaze.

Jie dressed in a pair of baggy trousers and a black linen shirt in the traditional style with frog buttons and a mandarin collar. He normally looked incredibly hot in a plain white t-shirt, always setting Meg's heart to fluttering but this style brought out how

devastatingly masculine he was. The black material emphasized the flawless golden tone of his skin and the large softness of his almond-shaped eyes.

She couldn't help staring at him, at the glint of light off his raven-colored hair and the sensuous fullness of his lips. He was breathtaking and there was rarely a time she looked at him that she didn't wonder how Su Lin could have given him up. Not that she wasn't grateful...

"Meg, you're beautiful," he said softly. He gazed at her, his dark eyes simmering, and offered his arm.

Her heart warmed. She hated the moments when she felt insecure, reminded of the way Jie warred constantly with his "inner werewolf," as Dave had coined the phrase. As usual, Jie's conflict put her off-balance, always reminding her that if he didn't "cure" himself, he wouldn't stay with her.

However, judging from the love and desire she saw shining in his eyes, his inner conflict was definitely *not* for lack of love for her. She smiled, feeling strangely shy as they stepped out into the hallway and Jie pulled their hotel door closed. "So are you."

In the lobby, she used the computer in the business center to e-mail Danny and let him and Dave know they'd arrived safely. She remembered to relay to him Jie's thank-you message for the hotel and said she'd write more the next day. She re-joined Jie and they went to one of the hotel's restaurants, Shang Palace, that served Cantonese cuisine.

The meal of roast duck and incredibly fresh and crisp stir-fries was beautiful, as was the casually elegant atmosphere of the dining room. But she had difficulty enjoying the meal to its fullest, knowing that as soon as she and Jie went back upstairs, he'd be calling Su Lin. The deepest, most discomfiting feeling simmered in the pit of her stomach when she thought of it.

Jie seemed to notice her discomfort, for halfway through the meal he frowned, gazing at her with concern. He reached over the table and put his hand over hers. "Meg, what is it? Please tell me your thoughts."

In spite of herself, she couldn't help smiling. She loved the sweet way he expressed himself at times. In that way, he reminded her a great deal of her grandfather, whom she'd adored. Indeed, she sensed that her grandfather's loving influence in her life had enabled her to recognize those qualities in Jie when she'd met him.

Then it hit her. She understood the deeper reason the prospect of Jie's speaking to Su Lin unnerved her so terribly. "I...understand something," she said softly.

He squeezed her hand, his touch resting on her. "What is it?"

She looked down at her plate, at the portion of uneaten roast duck. "I realized just now why I feel so disturbed about you speaking to Su Lin."

His thumb brushed against her skin. "It's not jealousy?" He sounded genuinely puzzled.

She shook her head. "No. I thought it was, at first. Not that jealousy doesn't come up. It's...even deeper than that." She leveled her gaze at him. "It's that I

feel...protective of you." She nodded, her words causing a sweep of resolve through her. She furrowed her brow. "I hate the thought of your having to speak to her when she's so...hostile toward you. I just don't understand it."

The chocolaty-brown depths of Jie's eyes appeared to melt. He squeezed her hand again and bowed his head. "Meg, you honor me so much with your love." When he looked back up at her, his eyes appeared misted over. "It means a great deal to me that you feel that way. However, in all fairness to Su Lin, I have to tell you that I'm a very different man with you than I was with her. You bring out the best in me."

Those last words caused a flush of pleasure. However, couched inside them, she sensed Jie's customary self-criticism and she frowned. "I'm sure you were always a good man."

His gaze darkened for a brief moment. He squeezed her hand once more then released it and picked his chopsticks up again. He heaved a deep sigh, looking down at his plate. "With you I am more of a good man, I suppose. But you might not think so if you'd seen me before. I wasn't as kind and gentle with her so much the way I am with you. Don't get me wrong, I didn't abuse her. It's not like that. But since you, I've..." He raised his gaze again to hers. "Softened."

*Softened.* Just the way he said it and the tenderness in his eyes almost caused her to melt into a puddle in her seat. The beautiful sentiment was marred only by his stubborn refusal to see himself as she saw him. She pushed past the warm tingle he'd brought her and humphed softly, jutting out her chin the way she did when she was quietly defiant. Su Lin's rejection of Jie had seemed only to confirm his low self-regard.

Meg decided then and there she didn't like that woman. Not one bit. "Still, Jie, there is such a thing as forgiveness. Knowing you, you've apologized a million times to her."

Jie gazed at her steadily and then took a sip of tea. He set the small cup down carefully before he spoke again. "Meg," he said, "If more people were like you, the world would be a much sweeter and more peaceful place."

She looked down, feeling her cheeks tingle with heat. "Thank you." She smiled. "I feel the same about you." She knew he didn't believe her. His self-doubt practically filled the space like a palpable force.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back in the hotel room after dinner, Jie sat heavily on the edge of the bed and picked up the phone. He knew it was somewhat late to be calling Su Lin but his ex-wife never went to sleep before two in the morning. Slowly, he dialed his old phone number, hoping that Su Lin had kept it.

The phone clicked on the third ring. "Hello?" The female voice was familiar. Su Lin still had the frightened, hard edge to her tone she'd always had.

His stomach clenched. "Su Lin," he said softly.

He heard her breath catch and he squeezed the earpiece. "Don't hang up, please. That wasn't me you saw, I swear it."

A long, tense pause ensued during which he could hear Su Lin's tight breathing. He was half surprised that she didn't hang up. But only half surprised. Su Lin was a complex woman who'd always had a love-hate relationship with him. She'd hated him enough to divorce him, yet she'd loved him enough not to use his own political views against him when she could easily have had him arrested and sent to a gulag for "reeducation" in Tibet.

Beside him, he felt Meg tense.

"Jie, are you calling me from jail?"

His heart raced. "I'm calling you from my hotel room, Su Lin. I just flew in from the United States with my fiancée."

Tension crackled invisibly through the line. "That's impossible," she snapped. "You were in front of my apartment building the other morning. You tried to grab me." Panic was rising in her voice.

"Su Lin, I swear that wasn't me. I give you my word."

"It was you," she spat. "A woman knows a man she's...been married to."

That last sentence sent a spiral of energy through his gut. "I swear to you it wasn't me. I can prove it."

Another tense pause. "How?"

"Meet me somewhere. I'll bring my fiancée. You won't be alone. Have Xun Ju come with you."

More tense silence. "All right. I'll meet you in the lobby of your hotel. I can come at noon."

His gut fluttered. "Noon is perfect. We're at the Shangri-La."

"I know where that is."

He heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Su Lin. You'll see that I wasn't the one who frightened you."

Su Lin was silent again.

Jie reached for Meg's hand and squeezed it, both to reassure her and to comfort himself. "See you tomorrow at noon," he said.

"Good night." Su Lin's line clicked off.

Slowly, he replaced the receiver and turned to Meg. Her wide gaze rested on his face, a swirl of emotions passing through the irises. He reached out and cupped her cheek. "Meg, thank you for being here with me."

She moved closer to him and embraced him, her face pressed into the curve of his neck. Moved by her sweetness, he pulled her close and squeezed her gently.

Their embrace lasted several long, sweet moments before he pulled away and looked at her again.

"Jie, are you all right?" Meg's voice was soft yet tight with concern.

He nodded slowly. "Yes." He leaned in and kissed her softly. He longed to curl up in bed with her in his arms and sleep but restlessness quivered in his limbs and heart and he knew he wouldn't sleep for a minute. "I'm anxious, though."

"Yes, me too." She sighed and pushed a wisp of her hair behind one ear. "I'm tired from the trip but I'm not tired, at the same time. There's too much happening to sleep. You know?"

He exhaled. "I know." He pushed up from the bed, paced to the window and stared out onto the well-lit gardens of the hotel. Behind him, he heard Meg rise too. She came to stand beside him and he put his arm across her shoulders. "I don't think I can sleep at all," he murmured.

She sighed. "Me neither."

His heart fluttered as he realized what he really wanted to do. "Meg, are you up to going out again?"

Her gaze lifted to his, her eyes wide. "I think so. Where?"

He released another deep breath and turned back to the window. "To the police station, the one closest to Su Lin's apartment building. I want to see this *twin* of mine."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Someone's here to see you." The guard's voice cut through his stupor. The last of his *qi* had nearly drained and he could barely raise his head from the thin pillow.

He blinked against the clanging of the key in the prison door.

The guard stood before him. "Come on." The uniformed man's voice was more like a bark. So cold and unkind. "Get up. They're waiting for you in the visitor room."

Slowly, with all the effort he possessed, he pushed himself up to a sitting position. The bit of effort tired him and he slumped over, his elbows on his knees.

The guard grasped his upper arms and tugged him to his feet. "I hope one of them's a doctor," he said. "You look like shit hit with a hammer."

He steadied his weight onto both sandaled feet while the guard clamped handcuffs on his wrists. That done, the guard grasped his upper arm again and propelled him out of the cell, into the corridor.

At first, the guard had to half drag him through the corridors but as he walked, he felt a bit of *qi* trickle into him, into his limbs, down his back and into his chest. His heart sped up to a normal beat and his breathing became easier. He walked more steadily, not needing the guard's rough support and he grew alert, understanding that someone important was waiting for him.

They came to a stop in front of a door. Another guard stood there and unlocked it.

His heart quickened yet more as the heavy metal click of the turning deadbolt echoed through his sharpened senses.

A scent, the scent of a woman's musky yin dew met his nostrils. A woman was in that room. A woman who stirred his yang force. His groin tightened and his cock twitched in response to the tangy musk of woman in the air.

The door opened and the guard led him inside to a white-walled room full of tables and chairs, empty but for two people, a man and a woman.

He looked at them. At her. At the woman he'd been seeing in his dreams. She was here.

His blood ignited in his veins and he whimpered.

Then he lunged for her.

The guards tackled him. He struggled to get to her but they yanked him back, keeping a stranglehold on him.

Meg stared, her eyes as wide as they could open.

The two men were dragging Jie's...twin?...away. The man could only whimper and growl and struggle.

*Jie?* No, it couldn't be. But it was. His presence defied all reason. This was a completely separate being. His hair was long and he had a beard. But it was Jie. She felt the man's energy in the room, his scent, identical to Jie's, carried to her. No doubt in her mind or heart. A woman knew a man she'd taken inside her.

Then she came out of shock. Meg felt his desperation as if it were her own. He needed her. Badly. He wasn't going to hurt her. She knew that.

"Stop!" she cried. "Stop!"

The guards froze by the door, keeping the twisting, writhing man in their grip. He grunted and whimpered, his large eyes desperate, pleading with her.

She stepped forward but Jie grabbed her wrist. "Meg, no."

She whirled around, her gaze met Jie's hard brown stare.

"Meg, he's dangerous."

It wasn't true. It just so wasn't true. She knew it in her deepest marrow. With surprising strength, she twisted her arm from Jie's grasp. "He won't hurt me." She lowered her voice to a whisper and switched to English, hoping the guards wouldn't understand. "He's *you*."

Jie stared at her. His lips parted to speak but Meg turned quickly back around and started again for the prisoner...for...Jie.

The longhaired man was watching her, his eyes wide, still pleading. His chest heaved from the exertion of his struggle. He lunged again but the guards held him firmly in place.

Meg looked at the larger guard. "Let him go," she ordered in Mandarin. "He won't hurt me."

"He must stay cuffed," the guard answered.

She gave the guard a hard look just as Jie came up close behind her, hovering protectively. "Fine," she said, "but stop hurting him."

The guards released the man and he bounded forward.

Meg thought he'd grab her but he fell to his knees before her. Locks of his smooth raven hair fell across his pleading eyes. His hands came up in a begging gesture and he grunted.

She stared back at him, listened to his guttural sounds, saw his Adam's apple slide in his throat. In just those few moments of looking at him, she saw who he was. Every bit of him was Jie, every hair, every eyelash, the full curves of his lips and the pattern of beard on his jaw and upper lip. Had Jie grown his facial hair, he'd have exactly the same thickness of beard, fuller around the chin, thinning out as it moved along his jaw and up his cheeks. "Jie," she whispered.

"What?" Jie answered behind her.

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "No," she said softly. "I mean...Jie." She gestured to the man on his knees.

He whimpered. *Please, come to me*, the sound said to her.

She understood. She stepped toward him.

He fell against her. His cheek sank against the softness of her belly.

Her heart melted. She embraced him, rested one hand on his heaving back through his rumpled baggy shirt and caressed his hair with the other as if he were a child. He was masculine, a strong man, an exact likeness of Jie, yet he emanated a childlike need, the very wild, unfettered creature that Jie detested in himself. "It's all right," she crooned, still stroking his hair. "We're here now. You're not alone anymore."

She didn't understand where the words were coming from in her but they flowed out. She sensed he needed to hear these words. She knew he was lost and alone and frightened, knew *him*, felt everything about him and the longer she stood stroking his hair and feeling his strong back under her other hand, the more knowledge poured into her.

Jie materialized at her side. He stood, staring down at the kneeling man whose face was pressed into her stomach. Jie's expression was a mixture of shock and of the practiced ability to remain inscrutable but she sensed the churning of emotions, the warring forces in his heart.

"This cannot be," he whispered. "I have no brother." He glanced at Meg. "None that I know of."

"Your godfather knew he was you, Jie, just as I do," she said. Then it hit her. A shiver passed up her spine. "Jie, when did Master Li first see him?"

"Maybe ten days ago. My godfather said he appeared out of nowhere."

The shiver in her body intensified. The knowledge of what had actually happened nearly shattered her balance, almost sent her crumpling to the floor.

The exercises. The Dragon-Tigress practices she and Jie had been doing the past few months. Since they'd performed the exercises, the cleansing and purifying of their yin and yang since Jie had been taking her yin inside him and mixing it to strengthen his *qi*, he'd not once changed into a werewolf.

But the werewolf hadn't disappeared. He'd split off.

The revelation was blinding. She gasped.

"What is it, Meg?" Jie's voice was tightly controlled and she heard the rage simmering underneath. He was obviously not at all happy about this man on his knees before her, taking comfort from her.

She heaved a deep breath, unable to speak right away. She waited for the shock of revelation to pass before she tried to answer. "Jie," she said, "Something really bad has happened."

His almond eyes widened and he continued to stare at her. "What has happened?"

Her hand rested on the kneeling man's head and she smoothed his hair back. He seemed oblivious to the conversation going on, seeming to want only to rest against her and to have her stroke him comfortingly. "Jie, you've...you've split off. This man...he is you. And..." She glanced down and then back up at Jie. "He needs the *qi* we've stolen from him."

## Chapter Twenty

Jie stared at Meg, his heart racing. He was too stunned to answer her immediately. The man on his knees, supposedly his...other half...the man in his earlier visions, or whoever the hell he was, stirred, obviously drinking in Meg's soft beauty and comfort. An impulse seized Jie to grab that man and yank him off his woman but another inner movement stayed him. He hated violence, detested the raging emotions inside him and had no wish to visit them upon this man who didn't seem to have any intention of harm.

Jie swallowed hard and cleared his throat. "How can you possibly know this?" His tone was churlish, petulant. Not what he'd intended.

Meg frowned. "I don't know how I know it, Jie. It just came to me." She leaned in slightly, lowered her voice again. "Let's be honest. How much weirder can it be than changing into a...you-know-what...every full moon?"

She was right, of course. He hated to admit it. Life was a mysterious thing and he'd never fully understand it no matter how long he lived. Even in the wake of his parents' murders he'd still been able to explain the violence as the result of man's potential for senseless inhumanity. However, that one bite he'd received out on the plains that night three years earlier, the bite that had made him a *lang ren*, had utterly destroyed his belief in an ordered universe that contained an explanation for everything. Not even the concept of alchemy could explain this transformation from *homo sapiens* to *canis lupus*.

Without responding he let his gaze lower to the kneeling man. Slowly, carefully, Jie studied every inch of him, sought out some part of his skin or hair or features that wasn't identical. So far, he couldn't find one skin cell that appeared different.

Jie knelt in closer. The man cringed, his eyes—mirror eyes to Jie's—wide and frightened.

Without words, Jie sensed the man felt hated by him. Fear radiated from his eyes, a kind of terror that made Jie feel monstrous. "I won't hurt you," Jie murmured. "I promise." He waited another moment, allowing the frightened man to become accustomed to his nearness. Jie could see that although he'd spoken gently and had meant his words, his scared double didn't believe him.

"Jie, what are you going to do?" Meg's voice sliced through the tense silence.

He looked up at her, shamed further by the protective note in her voice. He had to remind himself that she believed the man kneeling before her *was* him, not some other man. Jie needed to believe that otherwise she might not have let this wild stranger so close to her. "I need to see his back," he answered. "I want to see the scar. Li told me he'd seen it."

Her eyes widened. "The scar from the bottle?"

He nodded and turned his attention back on the cringing man. Jie felt himself soften a bit toward him. He hated that he'd inspired the man's fear. Having grown up with Buddhist monks, the concept of harmlessness had been ingrained in him from an early age. The fact that he'd gone through a tough period, fighting in a gang, was a memory of shame for him. He was, after all, a physician now, a healer above anything else. And if Meg was right, if he'd stolen this man's life force, he would, as a matter of honor and decency, need to find a way to return it. But how to do that was to be figured out later. First he needed to see the scar. He reached out again.

The man flinched and reached up, grasped Meg's pant leg with both cuffed hands.

Meg knelt down and placed her hands on his shoulders. She smiled at him gently. "No one is going to hurt you." Her voice was soft, crooning, as if she were speaking to a child. "I just need to lift your shirt, all right?"

Jie watched the man stare at Meg. When he looked at her, there was no fear in his eyes, only trust. Jie understood that feeling because Meg inspired the same faith in him as well. In all his life he'd never known a gentler woman.

Meg reached around, took hold of the man's baggy shirt, a shirt Jie now recognized as one of his own, a shirt he'd left at his godfather's place, the one with the tiny hole in the left elbow. Slowly Meg lifted it.

Jie peered at his double's back. His gaze landed on the scar, the pale, jagged line the broken bottle had left so many years before in a street fight. The scar Jie had managed to hide even from his godfather until it was healed enough not to make Li frantic when Jie returned to Xiahe months later and Li finally did see his injury.

"My God," Jie whispered. Without thinking, he reached out and touched the damaged skin.

The man yelped softly and grasped Meg, pressed against her like a child seeking protection. She hugged him. "It's all right, Shao," she said softly.

Jie looked at her. *Shao*? He didn't recall being told the man's name. Out of the corner of his eye, Jie saw her slender hand moving again on...Shao's...hair. Jie realized in that moment that Meg had named him.

"It's the same scar, isn't it, Jie?" she asked.

He looked up at Meg. "Yes. Identical." He heard the wonder in his own voice. A nagging feeling told him Meg was absolutely right about Shao's existence, as much as he absolutely did not want to believe it. He released the shirt, letting it cover Shao's back again and slowly rose up. "I can see why Su Lin thought he was me."

Meg looked at him with a knowing expression. She remained quiet and he knew why. He knew she wouldn't correct him in front of the guards. Su Lin had *known* it was Jie for the same reason Meg knew.

"Jie." Meg's gaze had misted over. "We can't leave him here. You know that, don't you?" Her hand passed over Shao's hair again, brushed it gently away from his face. "He doesn't look well."

Jie bowed his head. He was not happy about keeping this man with Meg. But there was nothing he could do. Every lesson about compassion the monks had taught him, every principle he'd absorbed as his own after years of suffering made it impossible to abandon Shao. What was worse, if Meg was right about the Dragon-Tigress exercises, then Jie had actually hurt Shao by stealing Shao's *qi*. "I know," he said softly.

He turned to the guard. "We'll pay his bail and take him with us."

Meg rose and slipped her hand around Shao's arm. In quiet tones, she urged him to stand with her. She waited with Shao while Jie paid the bail and went through the paperwork. The process took a while but finally they were free to leave and Jie got them into a cab to the hotel.

Shao sat between them in the back seat of the taxi, his manner subdued, obviously weak from the lack of life force. The most animation he'd shown was when he'd first seen Meg in the visiting room.

The thought disturbed Jie deeply. He sensed that Shao had smelled her yin dew, just as Jie always did when he was near her. Her scent was tangy, potent, intoxicating. From the first moment he'd walked into her grandfather's market in Chinatown months ago, her feminine musk had hung in the air, rousing his hunger.

"I want to feel Shao's pulse," he said quietly. He reached for Shao's hand, surprised when the man only flinched but didn't try to pull away or climb all over Meg for protection. Perhaps Jie's inner softening toward him had helped.

He put his fingertips over Shao's pulse and listened, concentrated all his attention on the tiny beat throbbing against the pads of his index and middle fingers. Yes, Meg was right. Shao wasn't well. From what Jie could feel, Shao would have died if left any longer in the jail. The man's entire system, his glands and organs, were all weakened. Strangely, there was no other hint of disease in his bloodstream or elsewhere. He was simply drained, robbed of *qi*, just as Meg had said.

Jie sighed and gently set Shao's hand down to rest on the seat between them. He didn't even want to consider the way in which they might have to restore Shao's *qi*. The theft of it had involved sexual activity with Meg. He forced his mind onto another aspect of the situation at hand.

"Meg."

She looked at him, her pretty face half in shadows. The colorful lights of the night-lit storefronts reflected on her skin and hair. "Yes?"

He glanced at the man between them before venturing his question. "If Shao and I are the same person, why did you name him Shao?"

To his surprise, a tiny smile teased the corners of her sweetly ripe lips. "He's *Xiao Jie*," she said softly. "Little Jie. The part of you that's hungry for love. An unwanted child, lost and alone. The ugly beast no one wants because he doesn't fit their idea of

perfection. Only, they're wrong. He's beautiful and good." She looked down and her features darkened with obvious sadness. "Xiao Jie was cast out of you because you didn't want him. Like an orphan."

Jie stared at her, unable to respond to her strong sad words. He remained silent until the taxi pulled up to the front entrance of the Shangri-La.

\* \* \* \* \*

Meg's heart was still pounding when the taxi came to a stop in front of the hotel. Jie hadn't spoken a word since she'd answered his question about Shao's name. As soon as she'd said the words, Jie's eyes had widened, fraught with a pained, shamed expression. Emotions, one after the other, had passed across his handsome features and the whole time he remained silent, she'd sensed him rejecting, resenting and reflecting all at once.

However, no fear of Jie's anger or rejection could sway her from what she knew was true. Shao *was* Jie, the deepest, sweetest, wildest part of him. The more disturbing, horrifying truth she'd understood when she'd realized why Shao existed was that not only would Shao grow increasingly more ill without the necessary healing to make him whole again but so would Jie. And then, they would have both died.

Without Jie, Meg's life could not go on. He was her mate, the other half of her heart and soul. No matter how he reacted to Shao, she knew the truth and would see that healing took place.

Jie paid the driver and opened the door. "Come," he murmured. "Let's go upstairs."

She nodded and took Shao's hand, gently urging him to slide across the seat after her and out of the cab. She felt his strength waning again and held him close, half-supporting his weight against her as they followed Jie through the glass doors into the lobby.

"Jie, he needs to eat," she said as they walked in the direction of the elevators.

Jie pushed the "up" button and turned to her, his face an unreadable mask. "I'll order something to be delivered to the room."

She nodded. They were alone in the elevator and she continued to watch Jie's face. Her heart ached at his remote behavior. "Jie, please talk to me. I'm sorry if what I said hurt you."

His gaze whipped upward, his eyes wide and he looked again as if he'd been struck. In the next moment, however, his expression softened and he bowed his head. "Don't be sorry. You didn't say anything to hurt me. You..." he paused and sighed while she waited, nearly breathless for his next words, "spoke the truth."

Jie glanced at Shao. Emotional pain slid into Jie's dark eyes. Shao didn't seem to notice. He leaned heavily against Meg and his head lolled as if it were too heavy to hold up.

"I know you're right about him, Meg." Jie heaved a deep breath. "And...I know I must find a way to restore what I've taken from him."

"From *yourself*, Jie."

He nodded. "From myself."

She gazed at Jie and her heart melted all over again for him, for his humility and care. She knew how difficult it had been for him to make that admission and she felt like the most fortunate woman in the entire world. He was *her* mate. Her soul mate. She smiled at him. "Jie, no matter what wrong you believe you've done in this life, you're a good man."

He looked back at her, the brown of his eyes liquid. "Coming from you, I can begin to believe it's possibly true."

The elevator doors slid open and Meg gently tugged Shao with her into the hallway. She followed Jie to their door. Her heartbeat quickened again as Jie slid the card key and pushed the door open.

She looked at the man clinging to her hand and smiled at him, at the sweet lost expression in his eyes. "Come, Shao. You'll be safe here." She led him into the room and ushered him to the seating area by the window.

Obediently he let her lead him and sank down onto the loveseat. He leaned back against the cushions, looking up at her.

She turned to Jie. He stood nearby, staring at Shao with an uncertain expression. "I'll run him a bath while you order the food," she told Jie. "Is that all right?"

Jie lifted his gaze to hers and nodded wordlessly.

She started for the bathroom, then heard a sound behind her. A hand grasped hers with lightning speed. She spun around and saw Shao's panicked face. Her heart turned to a puddle of mush for him and she pulled him into her arms. "Did you think I was leaving you? Never." She caressed his back, aware of Jie watching her. Jealousy simmered in the air from Jie's direction but she held fast to Shao, her concern for both men's lives overriding her fear of Jie's jealousy.

Gently she pulled from the embrace and took Shao's hand. "Come with me." She headed toward the bathroom with Shao in tow. Behind her, she heard Jie pick up the phone and ask for room service.

Once in the bathroom, she released Shao's hand and knelt at the tub. She opened the faucets and held her hand under the spray, adjusting the knobs to make a comfortable temperature. When the temperature was right, she closed the drain.

Shao knelt close to her. He watched, fascinated, as the torrent of water filled the tub.

She couldn't help smiling at his wondering expression. "This is for you, Shao." She reached for the small bottle of complimentary bath gel provided by housekeeping and emptied enough of the floral-scented stuff to make a nice froth of bubbles. She turned back to him took in the sight of his disheveled hair and clothing. "You could use a bath,

really," she said. No doubt it had been awhile since he'd bathed or changed his clothing, judging from his appearance and sweaty odor.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jie appear in the doorway of the bathroom. He stood there, watching her and Shao, the same unreadable expression on his face. If Meg knew him correctly, he was still struggling with jealousy. Understandable. If the situation had been reversed, she too, would find it nearly impossible to believe that her double was not truly another person receiving her mate's attention. She would have to work extra hard not to become furious. She smiled up at him and sensed a bit of his tension drain.

Jie's gaze moved past her and suddenly, his eyes widened.

Meg turned around and caught her breath.

Shao had pulled off his clothes and crouched down again close to her. The fingertips of both hands touched the tiled floor. His expression showed caution and he eyed Jie with lingering mistrust from his crouched, ready-to-spring position.

Meg tried and failed not to stare at Shao. His perfectly muscled body mirrored Jie's. Expanses of sleek golden skin, darker in places where the sun had kissed it, hugged finely etched muscles that quivered with tension. The same chocolate hued nipples as Jie's had topped Shao's round, hard pectorals. His legs, thick with sloping muscle and sprinklings of jet-black hair drew her gaze, touching off the first whispers of arousal.

The position of his knees and thighs hid his dragon but it would obviously be the same thick, veined rod of reddish gold and nest of black pubic hair, the same firm sac of life-giving yang fire beneath it.

Before she realized what she'd done, she licked her lips. She turned, afraid of inflaming Jie's jealousy, yet desperately needing him to understand. She leaned over to the tub, which was now filled with steamy, sudsy water and shut off the faucets. Silence, broken only by the drip of water from the tap, fell over the bathroom.

She glanced up at Jie, then at Shao. "Go on, Shao," she said softly. She trailed her fingers through the sudsy hot water for emphasis. "Get in."

Shao reached out and grasped her hand, his eyes pleading. A tiny whimper echoed from his throat.

She shook her head. "Of course I won't leave." Rising, she put down the seat of the toilet and perched on it, unable to keep herself from watching Shao unfold from his crouching position, his muscled body like Jie's, both rounded and powerful and lean at the same time.

Of course, his dragon was also like Jie's, hanging thick, even non-erect, the plump head hidden in its folds of skin.

She looked again at Jie, surprised to see a look of surrender in his eyes, as if he'd made a firm decision not to react from base, wild emotions.

"The food should be up here by the time he finishes his bath," he said softly.

She smiled at him and nodded, happy when the corners of Jie's full lips turned up just a bit. He looked at her one more lingering moment, then retreated into the main part of their room.

She then turned her attention to Shao. He'd settled into the tub and the white foam of bubbles covered the lower half of his body. She reached for a cup from the bathroom vanity and knelt by the tub, dipping the cup in the water and sluicing it over Shao's hair and upper body.

He looked at her and to her surprise, he smiled. The sudden delight that sparkled in his eyes made her smile back at him.

She giggled and dipped the cup in the tub again to refill it. "You like the water? Me too. A bath is a very good thing." She lifted the cup and he bowed his head, letting her douse the back of his hair. The water streamed down the ebony fall of his hair, making it stick-straight and gleaming.

Suddenly, he leaned over and dipped his head under the water as if he were bobbing for apples. He came up with a showering of bubbles and water that sprayed her.

She laughed and watched him dip under the surface a second time and then pop up again and shower her with the spray from his long hair.

She loved his playfulness, the childlike delight he took in the water and bubbles. The front of her blouse was now darkened with water and droplets dripped down her face. Water was everywhere on the floor, as if two children had been playing water games in the tub but she didn't care. She was happy to see life come back into Shao. It could only mean healing.

She reached for a bottle of shampoo and poured some into her hands. "Come here," she said, "I'll wash your hair."

He looked at her blankly at first, then smiled again and bowed toward her outstretched hand.

She rose up on her knees and lathered up his thick, long hair with shampoo. The sleek, wet strands slid against her fingertips and the smell of shampoo in the humid damp bathroom wafted to her nose. She massaged Shao's scalp, scrubbing his skin and hair clean with gentle fingertips. When she'd fully lathered his hair, she dipped her hands into the hot water to rinse them, then reached for the cup, careful not to let the shampoo run into Shao's eyes.

She needn't have worried. The moment he saw what she was doing, he leaned back, dipped his hair into the tub and shook the suds into the bathwater. When he straightened again, his glossy raven hair, heavy with water, hung stick-straight again around his strong shoulders. Water ran in rivulets off his golden skin, beading off his dark nipples.

Meg cleared her throat. Her body tingled pleasantly, especially her yin cave. She shifted her crouching position by the tub in an effort to distract herself then reached for a washcloth, wet it down and gently smoothed it across Shao's broad back.

He turned and looked at her. The playful look in his dark gaze had shifted to something else. His eyelids were heavier now over the smoldering depths of his irises and his nostrils flared with each wipe of the cloth over his skin. Meg passed the cloth over his round, hard pectoral muscles and heard him groan softly.

Her gaze met and locked with his. Her hand froze on Shao's chest. He rose to his knees in the tub, making evident his rising erection.

Meg caught her breath. She tried not to stare but couldn't help glancing down. A tingle passed through her at the sight of his hard dragon, now curving up from his dark pubic hair and heavy sac underneath. The water glistened on the thick reddish shaft, the lobes of the head smooth and taut. She didn't know what to do. Wash or not wash...

He reached for her hand. Strong thick fingers closed around her wrist, guiding her hand toward his thick shaft.

Her breath caught softly and her fingertips tingled in anticipation of touching the slick skin stretched tight from his erection. She thought of Jie. Strange, that he and Shao were the same man and yet...so different.

A knock sounded at the door to the hotel room. Shao released Meg and yanked his hand back. He slid back, flattened himself against the tiled wall with a loud slosh of water. He stared, obviously alarmed, at the partially open bathroom door.

In the background she heard a voice calling out *room service*. She released a sigh of relief and looked at Shao. "It's just some food for you," she said. "You must be hungry after all this."

In spite of her assurance, Shao remained against the wall. His body trembled and he whimpered. "It's all right, Shao," Meg crooned, her own heart pounding. She heard Jie pass to the front door, closing the bathroom door on his way. She reached out to Shao and picked up his hand. "I promise, it's all right."

Shao cringed another moment, his upper body dripping with water and bits of foamy bubbles. Meg tugged his hand gently and slowly, he moved back to the center of the tub.

She squeezed his hand, released it and opened the stopper of the tub. "Come, let's get you rinsed off and dry so you can eat." He rose to his feet and Meg noticed, unbidden, that his cock was still hard, in spite of what had happened. Trust shone unmistakably in his dark gaze and he let her rinse the suds off his body with the detachable showerhead.

She tried not to stare at his naked body as she rinsed him. The water ran in rivulets down his sleek muscles, flattening the smooth dark hair on his forearms and lower legs, making the hard round muscles of his buttocks and thick dragon gleam.

Meg marveled, both at his beauty and his likeness to Jie. Every detail of his body was Jie, even to the pattern of veins on his cock. She knew Jie blindfolded at this point, having touched and tasted every possible inch of his body.

When she'd finished rinsing Shao, he stepped from the tub and let her wrap him in a fluffy towel. She took a second towel from the stack, opened it and dried his back and

arms. Suddenly, he shook his long wet hair as if he were a dog, spraying water again everywhere. She laughed, enjoying his playfulness.

The bathroom door opened and Jie stood there, some clothing in his hand. "The food is here," he said, "and I brought a pair of pants for him." He stepped into the muggy wet bathroom and set the pants on the vanity.

She looked at him, seeing the surrender in his velvety dark eyes. He was a dear man, in addition to being the sexiest. "Thank you, Jie," she said softly.

He lingered another moment in the doorway and then went back into the room, leaving her to towel dry Shao's thick glossy hair and give him the pants to put on.

She watched him slip on the baggy silk material, unable to keep her gaze off his hard round buttocks before they were covered. His golden muscular torso rose above the waistband, making her hunger to run her hands and mouth over him. She swallowed hard and set down the towel, averting her gaze from his, which had begun to shine again with desire. She picked up his hand and gently tugged. "Have something to eat, Shao," she said softly. "Then Jie and I will figure out a way to...help you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jie watched Shao emerge from the bathroom. Meg trailed behind him and Jie immediately saw the telltale flush of arousal in her pale cheeks. The jealousy he'd promised himself not to feel sent a fiery streak up his arms. Jie took a deep breath and looked at Shao.

The *other* man wore Jie's trousers. Shao's long hair was still damp and shiny from his bath. Jie tried to imagine himself with that length of hair and his facial hair grown out. Even in his days of running with tough kids, he'd never worn his hair longer than it was now, shorn close to his head as if he were in the military, a bit longer on top. However, it was strange to see what he would look like...did look like...with the wilder appearance.

He looked again at Meg. Her face radiated a deeper sheen of happiness than it had in—his heart thumped, dammit—in the three months since they'd begun the Dragon-Tigress exercises. More heaviness settled onto his chest. She seemed to like Shao's wildness. She didn't say it in words but it showed in her eyes. Had she possibly missed the *lang ren* that much? Did she even realize that her eyes were shining the way they had when he'd first told her what he was and she'd accepted him wholeheartedly, without a moment's hesitation?

His heart pounding, he cleared his throat and indicated the room service cart laden with covered dishes. "I ordered food for all three of us," he said softly. "I thought you might be hungry too, Meg."

She smiled at him, her eyes disturbingly dreamy. "I guess I am a little hungry."

She approached the sitting area where he'd put the cart and as she drew closer, the scent of her yin juices filled the entire space, immediately setting Jie's body on edge.

Her tangy intimate musk filled his nostrils, causing his dragon to stir and harden. As she sank down onto the sofa, bringing Shao to sit next to her, Jie saw the glaze of desire in her eyes.

He glanced at Shao. His...twin's...complexion had darkened, the same way his own did when he wanted Meg.

Jie clenched his jaw and fought another potent wave of jealousy. He was determined not to frighten Shao any more than he had already or to bring Meg another unnecessary moment's suffering. He understood the situation better than he wanted to admit to himself, even down to the only possible way to restore the stolen *qi* to his other...half.

He removed the silver dish covers on the cart, revealing a dish of Mongolian beef, chicken teriyaki with rice and pizza.

"Thank you, Jie." Meg was looking at him again, her eyes still radiating joy and desire.

The look pulled a smile from him in spite of the heaviness he felt inside.

Shao stared at the food. He seemed to hold back as if he needed permission to eat. It was strange to Jie how much like a wild creature, a child, and a man Shao was all at the same time.

Jie's heart lurched. Was this the being that his godfather had seen in him all those years of his wild youth, the being the older man had continued to love unconditionally? Was Shao truly so innocent both as a human and a beast that Meg did not see the *lang ren* as deficient and horrid, as he saw it?

For the first time since he'd been bitten, Jie saw the beast—saw himself—through different eyes. Through the eyes of people who loved, rather than who judged and criticized him, as he did...as Su Lin had. His pulse rose, increased with his deeper understanding. He wasn't detestable for having harbored the resentments and done the things he'd done. He'd been troubled, an unhappy person who'd made mistakes and was good-hearted enough to wish to undo them. For the first time, he appreciated, rather than felt angry about, the complexity of being human.

He looked again at Shao through his new understanding and felt softer toward that broken part of him. Jie reached for a bowl and spooned helpings of the beef and chicken into it, added some sticky rice. Picking up a pair of chopsticks, he held the offering out to Shao.

Large brown eyes...his own eyes...gazed back up at him, as if deciding whether Jie would attack him or not. Shao reached out with hands that looked exactly like Jie's, right down to the pinkish skin under the nails, and accepted the bowl and chopsticks. In the next second, Shao brought the bowl close to his lips and set to eating, rapidly scooping one mouthful of food after the next into his mouth with the chopsticks as if someone would take the food away from him before he finished. When Jie looked at Meg, she was watching Shao eat while nibbling on a slice of the pizza.

For himself, he poured a cup of tea and sat quietly, taking in the sight of Meg and Shao, side by side, a sweet, companionable affection between them. The improvement in Shao's health in just the little bit of contact he'd had with Meg was undeniable. However, the restoration of Shao's *qi* was only half the matter. There was also the matter of their lycanthropy. Shao had not existed until recently and...well...becoming one again with Shao meant...

Jie shook the thoughts from his mind. He had to deal with the first hurdle of seeing Shao and Meg...together. *That* was going to be difficult enough.

It had been several months since Jie had undergone the change and he hadn't missed it. He couldn't deal with the prospect of Shao's and his rejoining, of having to be the *lang ren* once more just yet.

Jie remained quiet, sipped his tea while Shao devoured most of the food on the cart. As soon as Shao finished one bowl of food, he'd look up at Jie or Meg, a pleading look in his eyes. One of them would refill the bowl and the food would rapidly disappear once again.

Finally, there was nothing left and Shao sat quietly, looking down, the empty bowl and chopsticks in his hands.

Jie watched him, not moving. He couldn't help his own need to procrastinate. He didn't feel quite ready for the next step.

Meg moved first. The way she inched closer to Shao caught Jie's eye. He glanced up in time to see her hand smooth back Shao's long hair.

The streak of jealousy heated Jie's middle again and he looked at Meg's face, unexpectedly trapped by the sympathetic way she looked at Shao.

"It's all right, Shao." Her soft voice was gentle enough to soothe the most agitated being, even Jie's jealous monster. "No one will hurt you again. I promise." Her hand left his hair and she gently retrieved the bowl and chopsticks from Shao, setting the items on the cart.

She picked up a cloth napkin and leaned in to Shao. "Let me just clean you off," she said softly and wiped Shao's lips and beard as if he were a child rather than a grown man.

Her touch caused Shao's eyes to darken again and Jie sensed the coiled tension of desire in the *lang ren*. Jie knew that Shao wanted to spring at her, launch his body onto hers, push her back and take her. Even if Shao had not been Jie's other half, Jie would have known this because it's what he, himself, wanted to do to Meg, just about all the time.

Jie stood. His movement made Shao look up. Without speaking, Jie set his teacup on the cart and pushed it away before returning to the seating area. With both Shao and Meg watching him intently, he sank down on the sofa next to Meg.

Shao turned slowly, his gaze now riveted on Jie's. To Jie's surprise, there was far less fear now in the *lang ren*'s eyes. The look in them swirled with caution, desire, need and a touch of challenge.

Shao shifted position. He folded his legs underneath him and then rose up on his knees.

Jie watched, tension coiled in his chest, for what Shao would do next.

To Jie's surprise, Shao reached out, passed over Meg and grasped Jie's wrist.

Jie pulled back but Shao's fingers tightened. Shao trapped Jie's gaze in his and he stared back at the *lang ren*, his own heart pounding again. Jie had an impulse to struggle, to free himself from Shao's grasp but as the moments passed, he felt his body relax, acquiesce, as if the same pulsing desires had passed through Shao's hand into Jie's body.

Jie surrendered. His arm relaxed in Shao's hold. What would happen in the next moment he didn't know. Life had shown him that anything was possible. "What are you doing?" he whispered to Shao.

Shao didn't answer, not even a grunt and Jie glanced at Meg. She'd sunk back against the cushions, watching Shao. Her full breasts rose and fell with deep breaths and the scent of her arousal suddenly churned the air, heady and tangy.

In spite of his tension, Jie responded. His dragon came to life with hunger. The bulge grew, pushed against the front of his jeans. The arousal was so intense, his balls practically throbbed with swirling life. The life force he needed to return to Shao.

At first, Jie tried to fight his churning lust. His breath rasped tightly with the effort of struggle and his arm tensed again under Shao's commanding pull. Jie's cock ached now and he could feel the head poking from its sheath to press with a demand of its own against his trousers. His body demanded Meg's. The yin-soaked cavern between her thighs made him ache to bury his dragon deep inside her.

Shao drew Jie's hand up and held it just above Meg's breasts. Jie glanced at Shao. Shao narrowed his eyes and grunted softly. In the next second, Shao pushed down on Jie's hand. One of Meg's lush breasts filled Jie's palm.

Shao grunted again and made Jie's fingers close around the soft swell over Meg's silk blouse.

Meg released a deep sigh and the scent of her yin rain surged, strong and hot as if someone were burning Meg-scented incense in the room. "Jie," she whispered.

Jie stared down at her. Her pale skin was flushed, her soft lips parted, her eyelids heavy. Her soft look of aroused surrender reminded him of the first time he'd ever kissed her, the taste of her supple skin as he'd trailed his tongue up her arm, over her shoulder, onto her neck and then...

Shao's hand closed over Jie's, urged Jie to squeeze Meg's breast in slow, tight circles. Shao's own breathing rasped heavily, blended with Meg's and Jie's. If Jie had been concerned about the process of restoring Shao's *qi* to him, he needn't have.

The *lang ren* seemed to know exactly how to get his *qi* back.

Meg turned her head slightly and looked at Shao. She was so aroused, she could barely move. Her limbs, her bones, her insides had melted to quivering jelly and all she wanted was for both men to be inside her, to take her, kiss her and lick her, their hands caressing and squeezing.

Shao hovered close to her on one side, Jie on the other. The warmth of both men's breathing caressed her cheeks. Their combined scent, the musk of man and animal, filled her, caused her cinnabar cave to swell and throb, slippery and open with her juices.

Someone tugged at the frog closures of her blouse, frantically worked to get the pegs free of the tiny loops. It took another moment before she realized the hands were her own, desperate to free her breasts from their restraints and expose them to both pairs of hungry eyes and hands...and mouths.

Suddenly Jie was helping her. Shao had released his hand so that he could. Thank God. She couldn't wait.

The blouse opened. Jie worked open the front latch of her bra, let her breasts spring free. The same yin rain that trickled from her between her thighs sent tingling energy into her belly and breasts. She arched her back, instinctively seeking the warm moist press of a mouth on her nipples.

She breathed heavily, waiting. Nothing happened. She heard Jie and Shao's heavy breathing, felt their heated gazes on her bare breasts but nothing happened.

She opened her eyes and looked at them. Her heavy-lidded gaze moved from one handsome face to the other, begging with her eyes. Why were they hovering like this, not touching her? Her body surged in protest.

In the soft lighting of the room, she saw Shao raise his hand not to her breast but to Jie's cheek. Shao slid his touch around Jie's head and cupped the back of his neck. With a firm press, Shao pulled Jie down toward her breast. Shao seemed to know what was needed in order to restore the balance of yin and yang that had been stolen from him.

Meg saw Jie hesitate and glance at Shao. She sensed Jie's resistance to Shao's direction, mingled with his desire.

Shao grunted softly.

"Please, Jie," she whispered. She arched her breasts upward again and Jie took one hardened peak between parted lips.

"Ohhh." She couldn't help the long sigh that escaped her when Jie's moist, hot mouth closed over her aching nipple. The flicker of his tongue over the tip sent icy heat through her breast, scattered sparks of pleasure through her body. Energy charged through her, rendered her completely pliant and needy. Her yin juices seeped mercilessly from her slit, soaking her panties.

She moaned softly, encouraging Jie to suck every bit of yin from her body that it could give. She tilted her head back against the cushions, her lips parted and arched her back more, pushed her breast deeper into Jie's mouth.

Meg felt Jie surrender more with each second. Tension eased from his body and he sucked her nipple with increasing fervor. She felt his hand close gently over her other breast and squeeze it. She sighed and clasped his head, lost in the pleasure.

Gentle fingertips pinched and rolled her already-hardened nipple and each pulse of pressure sent tingling heat into her pussy. Jie's free hand rested on her hip, over her clothing, close to where his erection pushed into her thigh.

A third hand caressed her cheek.

Shao. His fingertips brushed her skin in delicate yet fervent motions.

Oh...this was incredible. Meg sighed again. Her body completely fell open in surrender.

Shao's touch slid down to her throat. The pads of his fingertips explored, savored her, while Jie's tongue and lips tugged her nipple harder, drew yin from her into him. His male *yang* fire heated the air around them, intensified the feral scent of man mixed with beast that permeated her senses.

Shao's fingers skated back up, across the seam of her lips. She parted her lips and he pushed the tip of his index finger onto her tongue, gave her a hint of his salty-sweet male taste.

She opened her lips wider, gulped at his finger to take it all the way in and suck it but he pulled it away. Instead, his fingertips landed on her other cheek, gently pressured her to turn her face toward his.

Just then, Jie lifted his mouth from her nipple and dragged his tongue over the fleshy swell of her breast, down into the valley of skin to her other breast. He stopped only when he'd reached her other nipple, which was taut and ready for his mouth. In the next second, he captured the sensitive bud between his lips, licked and sucked it with the same moist, heated fervor as he had the other one.

She moaned again. Another pair of lips captured the sound. Shao. His soft moustache and beard tickled her skin pleasantly. His lips, just like Jie's, were full and ripe, masculine and delicious, his tongue hot and slippery as he tasted the soft insides of her mouth.

Shao's scent and flavor filled her. She sighed and opened her lips wider to his kiss. As soon as she did, Shao tugged her tongue between his lips and sucked it, sliding his lips up and down in tiny motions that imitated sex.

Gone was the lost boyish creature, replaced with a wild man whose hand slid down her arm and over onto her belly, trapped in the space between her body and Jie's. Shao worked open the button on her pants and stole inside. His warm palm trailed fire across her sensitive skin.

She moaned again into his mouth and laced her fingers into his long sleek hair, fisted it, pulled his mouth tighter against hers while her other hand cradled Jie's head, following his movements as he sucked her.

Shao's fingers raked through her pubic hair and slipped into the seeping crevice between her thighs. His fingertips found her engorged clit and caressed it in tiny circles. Icy heat tingled in the wake of his touch...so incredible. Shao stopped every few seconds and slid two thick fingers inside her, pushing deep, massaging the soft inner walls of her cave with hot, eager fingertips.

Meg sighed deeply. Her body sagged further down on the cushions to allow Shao's hand to pleasure her more freely.

Suddenly his hand wasn't there. His fingers slipped away from her sweet spot, leaving a cruel absence. At the same time, he lifted his mouth from their kiss.

She stifled a cry and looked up, her gaze trapped by the dark arousal flushing his skin. His soft lips were parted and swollen from kissing her and he panted as he looked back down at her.

He grunted softly and pushed Jie's shoulder.

Jie started and raised his mouth from Meg's breast. He too, was panting, obviously stunned by the interruption and his lips, like Shao's were swollen and moist, his eyes dark and heavy-lidded. "What is it?" he breathed.

Shao leaned over, grasped the waist of Jie's jeans and yanked.

Jie drew back, stared at him. "What?"

Meg looked back at Shao. She expected him to be cowed by Jie's retreat. Instead, Shao grasped Meg's pants and tugged, not seeming to understand the concept of the zipper. He grunted again and reached for Jie.

This time, the message was clear.

Jie hesitated. For several torturous moments, his gaze flickered back and forth between Meg and Shao. She held her breath, then saw his expression shift, eyes darken, hunger rise in them once again.

He nodded. "I understand." Without another word, he undid his jeans, toed off his shoes and slipped everything off.

The sight of him naked in the soft lamplight sent desire rippling through Meg's entire body. Every time she looked at Jie was like the first, struck always by the curves and slopes of his chiseled arm and chest muscles, the v-shape of his torso and the round hardness of his buttocks, thighs and calves. She couldn't suppress a smile, feeling greedy and blissful, surrounded by Jie and Shao, both wanting her.

Jie knelt before her and pulled down her zipper, finishing what Shao had begun. Shao knelt beside her. His breath rasped heavily with want, his gaze riveted on her and Jie with expectant darkness. She understood then. Strange how the knowledge rose so clearly in her fevered mind. Shao needed her and Jie to come together, so he could harvest the *qi* generated by their combined energies.

A pleasant shiver coursed down her thighs as Jie slipped her lace panties and pants off in one movement. *Qi* or no *qi*, she wanted this desperately.

Jie tossed her clothing aside and settled between her spread thighs, his cock fully hard, the head smooth and taut, straining. The sight of silky reddish skin stretched over the veined muscle made Meg's mouth water and she reached for Jie, slid her hands around him and pulled him onto her.

Jie's hard dragon slid against her moist crevice. His shaft grazed her hot center.

She moaned, wanting him inside her so badly, and rolled her hips to give him complete access. He nudged her slick opening with the head of his cock. She whispered his name and pulled him close.

"Meg," he breathed and drove deep inside her with one smooth thrust.

Their bodies met again, this time with his cock buried to the hilt in her wet cave. Each tiny movement he made with his hips rubbed the inside of her passage with erotic friction.

Meg grasped Jie's hips and ground her hips in rhythm to his. Each thrust rubbed her sweet spot, sweet icy heat that drove her closer to release. Her yin dew flowed, coating Jie's cock, and energy coursed freely through her body. Every second of sheer pleasure brought her closer.

Jie thrust deep and hard, his rhythm fast, his breath in sharp gasps.

Meg threw her head back, lost completely in Jie, his scent, his cock inside her, his strong body on her.

He withdrew and plunged deep inside her again. That last hard thrust sent Meg over. She cried out and clutched Jie's buttocks as she came. Her orgasm rippled through her lower body in blinding waves. In the throes of ecstasy, she felt lips claim hers. She thought Jie was kissing her but then felt the tickle of facial hair grazing her chin. Shao. Shao kissed her, his warm soft lips covered hers. In a deep soft rhythm, his breath mingled with hers. Without being told, she knew Shao was drinking in the abundant nectar of yin that swirled through her body.

She opened her lips wider, let him drink all he wanted while her hands still held Jie close. She dug her fingers into Jie's hips, moving against him so that he'd come too.

She squeezed her vaginal muscles around his cock. The tiny movements pulled a groan from him. Jie thrust faster. "Meg," he whispered, over and over. He groaned softly and tensed. His dragon throbbed inside her, preparing to release its seed.

She squeezed.

Jie cried out and plunged deep, his hands braced on the cushions by her thighs. He pushed against her, body tense. Meg felt his dragon empty its yang cloud deep inside her. Then Jie released a long, deep breath and collapsed gently on top of her.

Meg put her arms around his sweating, strong torso. His damp skin fused to hers. She closed her eyes and rested her lips in the curve of his neck, breathing in his musky aroma. Pressing her lips to his shoulder, she feathered the tip of her tongue on his salty male skin.

A hand smoothed over her brow. She looked up.

Shao's face hovered close to hers. His breath was sweet from their mingled kiss but his eyes still burned with need. His desire rippled in the air around them and tension simmered from his touch.

Meg's breath caught softly and her body hummed with the renewal of desire. One thing was abundantly clear.

Shao wasn't finished with her.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Jie lifted his body away from Meg's. His softening dragon slipped from her moist cave. Now was always the moment when he lay down and pulled her lush body against his, breathing in her sweet yin aroma.

This time was different, of course. Shao hovered over both of them, his eyes burning with sexual hunger. The *lang ren's* breath rasped loudly and he breathed heavily. Shao's presence crackled with virile life and Jie caught his breath. The moment he'd worried about was now here. Now he struggled to remember that Shao was *not* a separate man, another man who simply wanted to release his desire on the woman Jie loved.

Jie stared at Shao, his own emotions warring inside him.

Shao glanced at Jie. Shao's expression took on a pained look and he whimpered.

Meg sat up and reached out to Shao. Jie fought back the impulse to grasp her wrist and keep her from touching Shao. Her hand landed gently on Shao's cheek. Jie frowned. She seemed to understand better than Jie what was needed.

Meg's touch seemed to affect Shao deeply. Desire once again darkened Shao's eyes and he slipped off the couch, lowered himself on his knees to the floor. To Jie's shock, Shao reached out, his hand landing on Jie's hip, the pressure of his hand bidding him to move away from between Meg's thighs.

Sudden anger burned in Jie's face and chest. "What is he —"

"Jie, I love you." She leaned into him and kissed him. The tip of her tongue against the seam of his lips bade them part.

He responded, opened to her and slid his tongue softly against hers. Her gentle kiss melted his tension away and he rested his open mouth against hers. Their mingled breaths passed back and forth until Jie no longer felt a drop of apprehension.

Finally, she pulled away and looked at him, her eyes soft with love. "You'll never be healed until you let it happen," she said gently. "Shao needs to draw out the yang you've given me."

Jie stared at her. "How do you know this?"

Shao had moved closer, not relinquishing the pressure of his hand on Jie's hip. Jie felt the mixture of plea and command in the touch.

"I don't know how exactly," Meg said softly. "I just know."

Her large almond shaped eyes, deep and simmering, entranced him. Through her look he remembered the truths he'd understood earlier that evening. The memory allowed his possessiveness to subside and he rose up and sank down on the sofa next to Meg, allowing Shao to take his place between her spread thighs.

Jie watched Shao's hands slide up the creamy flesh of Meg's thighs, up her stomach and over her breasts. Meg watched him too, sighed under the obvious pleasure of Shao's touch. In spite of his worry, Jie stared, mystified. Shao's likeness to him made him feel as if he were watching himself make love to Meg. The sensation was, actually, not in the least unpleasant.

Shao leaned over Meg and captured her lips in a soft kiss. Jie saw Shao's tongue slide between Meg's lips. Shao tasted the moist recesses of her mouth in a sensual dance. His body, hard and male, sank onto her softness, pressed down her full breasts. Jie had never witnessed anything so erotic in his life and his own body began to vibrate with renewed desire.

Shao kissed Meg long and deep and Jie could see the Adam's apple in Shao's throat slide up and down as if he were drinking from Meg. Strangely, he, himself, began to feel calmer, more peaceful, in spite of the renewed arousal that thrummed through every nerve ending in his skin. Jie shifted in his seat to accommodate his growing erection.

Shao ended the kiss with a light nip at Meg's full lower lip. He nibbled her jaw and then dragged the tip of his tongue down her throat and lower, down, down until he reached the valley of soft skin between her breasts. He rounded one pale swell with his tongue and took the nipple into his mouth. His lips rested there but Jie could still the muscles of Shao's throat work, as if he drank from her.

Tiny whimpers echoed in Meg's throat and her eyes fluttered closed. She tilted her head back against the cushions, her hands wound in Shao's long hair. With each tug of Shao's lips on her nipple, her fingers tightened and relaxed.

Jie loved watching her—the tiny movements of her fingers, her soft sighs of pleasure.

After what seemed a long time, Shao released the nipple and kissed a path across to her other breast, which received the same long, erotic sucking. Shao's hands slipped down to Meg's hips, caressed the pale soft skin in gentle circles. His fingertips fanned out as he caressed her and Jie watched, sensing the way the strokes of Shao's fingers drew forth Meg's *qi*.

Shao trailed his touch down her thighs and back up again on her inner thighs, seeming to draw the energy into her seeping cave.

Meg moaned softly and sank down further on the cushions until her bottom nearly hung over the edge of the seat.

Finally, Shao released Meg's other nipple and Jie could see Shao's saliva gleam on the tight dusky peak. Jie licked his own lips. The sight made his own mouth water to taste Meg again, to have her musky yin flavor roll over his tongue.

Shao dragged the tip of his tongue down the center of Meg's soft pale stomach, his body crouching lower between her thighs.

Riveted now, Jie watched Shao spread open the lips of Meg's sex, revealing the glistening inner folds. Meg whimpered and lifted her hips a bit off the cushions. Jie

knew Meg's responses well now and understood her silent yet fevered way of begging for release.

Shao's thumbs held open her jade gate and he pressed his mouth to her yin pearl. Jie could practically taste her tangy musk when Shao dragged his tongue over the sensitive bud, causing Meg to whimper again. Shao licked her once more, tracing the length of her moist crevice with the tip of his tongue. He then slid his hands under her buttocks, lifted her hips upward and pushed his face into her open pussy.

Meg cried out softly. She arched her hips again and arched into Shao's mouth. Meg's yin musk permeated the air.

Jie breathed deeply of her scent and her pleasure cries filled his ears. Before he could stop himself, he leaned over her and took her mouth in a fervent kiss. Demandingly, he slipped his tongue between her lips and tasted her—a tangy sweetness mixed with the feral musk Shao had left on her lips. Jie cupped one of her breasts, palming the fullness. Meg whimpered into his mouth and parted her lips wider. Spurred on by her obvious pleasure, Jie squeezed her breast then worked her nipple with his fingertips, pinching and kneading it until she panted into their joined mouths.

Meg couldn't think. Sparks exploded behind her eyes and her body was one mass of writhing pleasure. Shao sucked her clit, driving her mad, while Jie kissed her and kneaded her breasts in his eager hand. Her body crested rapidly toward her second orgasm.

Shao slipped a finger into her passage, massaging the soft inside in a rhythm against his mouth. A second finger went in, then a third. The thick fingers filled her, stretched her with delicious pressure.

His lips closed harder over her clit. The icy heat of his tongue brought her closer. Closer.

She exploded. Pleasure broke through her, wave after wave, wringing her body until she went limp under the hands and mouths of both men, her chest heaving.

Jie pulled his mouth from hers and looked down at her. His beautiful almond eyes were dusky and wild and his lips swollen from kissing her. She could only stare back, wordless, at him then at Shao, whose eyes held the same feral hunger in them. Her musk gleamed on his beard and lips and she could smell her own sex in the air.

A soft growl emanated from Shao's throat. She stared at him, trapped by the sudden glowing light in the depths of his eyes. His body went rigid. His glowing eyes rolled back, showing the whites. He growled again and fell over, his body curled in a fetal position.

Her pleasure immediately forgotten, Meg shot up and crouched next to Shao. "He's Changing, isn't he, Jie?" She stroked Shao's hair. "God, it looks so painful."

To her surprise, Jie slipped down to the floor beside her. He placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "It's all right, Meg. He's not hurt."

Meg looked down at Shao. His skin had darkened and his features were already shifting, losing their human appearance. She raised her eyes again to Jie. "Does it hurt?"

Jie thought to remind her of the time she saw him change in the studio before he fought the Russian *lang ren*. However, that transition had been rapid, spurred on by his fierce need to protect Meg. Since then, they'd been practicing the Dragon-Tigress exercises and she hadn't had occasion to see him change. "There is some pain but it doesn't last." He didn't want to worry her more than she already was.

He reached for Shao's wrist and felt his pulse. Shao's nails were elongating and glossy ebony fur sprouted from his skin. Shao's pulse was strong, coursing with life, a stark contrast to the near-death slowness it had been back in the police station.

Apparently, Shao's contact with Meg, his harvesting of *qi* from her body, was already working.

Meg remained silent and watched Shao. All she could do was caress his hair. She remembered the one time she'd seen Jie change. The transition had been rapid, fueled by protective anger. This process was considerably slower, allowing her to witness every detail as Shao morphed from a handsome man into a wolf, his fur sleek ebony, his mane thicker and longer than the fur on the rest of his body.

Shao's eyes glowed a yellow-green. Long incisors peeped out from his lips, which curled up the length of his whiskered canine snout. No doubt he was the beast that Jie had not changed into these last few months.

Her heart squeezed. She'd missed this part of Jie very much. She loved that wild creature full of instinct and pure passion and hoped fervently that Jie would grow to love and accept that part of himself as she did.

After what felt like a long time, Shao's transformation was complete. The large wolfen beast rose to all fours and shook itself. He stood, his green-gold eyes moving between Meg and Jie.

To Meg's surprise, Shao whimpered, sounding like a dog begging for food. He shook himself again and closed the small space between himself and Meg. He nuzzled her cheek, then dragged his long pink tongue across her cheek.

Meg giggled. Shao put his cold wet nose to the opening of her ear and nuzzled. The pleasant tickle caused her to tilt her head. She laughed and reached out, gathering Shao's wolf body in an embrace. She squeezed him tight, breathing in the musky scent of his sleek fur. He pulled back and licked her face again.

She giggled. "I've missed you." The words were out before she realized what she'd said. She looked at Jie.

He was watching her with Shao. Sadness filled his dark eyes.

Meg's heart ached for Jie. She leaned in to him and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. "I love you," she whispered. "All of you, Jie."

As if he understood what was happening, Shao turned and looked at Jie. He whined and pushed his large wolf head against Jie's chest, his large, furry tail tucked between his hind legs.

The plea for love was so obvious, Meg stayed respectfully silent. Jie was a dear, good-hearted man who understood all too well what was happening. She reached out and ran her hand along Shao's back but Shao didn't seem to notice, so intent was he now on getting Jie's attention.

Slowly, Jie rested his hands on either side of Shao's sleekly furred head. Shao whined again and pushed his muzzle against the underside of Jie's jaw.

"I'm sorry," Jie murmured. He smoothed one hand over Shao's canine head. "I don't mean to be cruel."

Meg sat quietly, listening to Jie speak softly to Shao. Jie was explaining in a sudden release of heartfelt words the reasons for his behaviors and attitudes. Feeling like an intruder, she backed away, rose softly to her feet and padded to the bathroom. She brushed her teeth and slipped on her nightgown.

She stood at the mirror, watching her reflection. She wasn't used to wearing silky lace-edged nightgowns but this one had been a going away gift from Danny and Dave. Danny had picked it out, no doubt. He had exquisite taste, judging from the gorgeous guy he'd fallen in love with. Only Danny, her friend for almost their whole lives, could have given her a gift like this. She'd been looking forward to having Jie see her in it. She'd just never imagined he'd see it under quite these circumstances.

Smiling to herself, she peeked into the room. Jie sat on the floor with Shao's head resting in his lap. Jie was stroking Shao's head as if Shao were his faithful companion.

Jie must have felt her gaze on him, for he looked up and smiled at her, the expression in his eyes a bit sheepish. With his other hand, he motioned for her to come over and sit next to him. As she came closer, Jie's eyes widened and a look of male appreciation darkened the irises. He reached out to her. "How beautiful you look," he said softly.

Overcome with a sense of joyous contentment, she lowered herself quietly to the floor and kissed Jie's cheek. "Thank you." She looked down at Shao, who seemed oblivious to everything except Jie's caress on his head.

She sighed contentedly. Apparently the open exchange of energy through lovemaking, however strange it was, had begun to work. She wanted to ask Jie how he felt but sensed intuitively that now was a time to remain quiet and let him process his emotions.

Jie squeezed her hand. "It's very late," he said softly. "I think we'd better get some sleep. We see Su Lin tomorrow."

Her insides jumped at the mention of Jie's ex-wife. Her stomach tightened and she tried not to let her worry eat away at her newfound contentment.

A strange thought occurred to her and she glanced down at the contented Shao. "Jie?"

He looked at her. "Yes?"

"What if Shao...has to go to the bathroom?"

Jie chuckled softly. The warm gentle sound filled her. "Don't worry, my love. Werewolves retain the memory of how to use a toilet if it's needed. At least, I have."

She smiled. "Okay. I won't worry then. I couldn't imagine walking him through the lobby and down the street looking for a fire hydrant."

Jie laughed again. "Nor could I." He shifted his weight, gently dislodging Shao's head from his lap.

Shao looked up expectantly, whined softly as if afraid Jie had changed his mind about liking the wolf. Jie reached out and stroked Shao's fur. "It's time to sleep, my friend." He rose to his feet, bringing Meg up with him.

Meg went to the large king-sized bed and pulled down the covers. She settled in on one side and watched Jie lower himself onto the mattress.

Before she knew what was happening, Shao bounded onto the bed and lodged his huge wolfen body between her and Jie. She giggled and reached up to ruffle his fur. "I think he's trying to tell us something."

Jie sighed. He too, reached out and stroked Shao's fur. "I didn't know liking you included this." But he smiled and leaned over Shao's large body to kiss her. "Sleep well, love," he said.

She smiled at Jie. Her heart burned with love for him. "You too." She settled down and covered the three of them with the fluffy comforter.

Shao's soft warm body was pressed the length of hers. He turned his wolfen head to her and nuzzled her cheek, then settled his muzzle between his two front paws.

She reached up and scratched Shao behind the ears, her fingers burrowing into the sleek fur. "I love you too, Xiao Jie."

She closed her eyes. Her exhaustion finally caught up with her.

Her sleep was full of wonderful dreams, of Shao and Jie caressing her and kissing her, their hands and lips warm and loving. Shao covered her body with his, nudged her legs apart so he could settle his slim hips between her thighs. His dragon was hard, pushing with demand into her slick opening.

She pulled her legs open wider, let his thick hardness fill her, stretch her wide. *Mmm, what a dream.*

She woke up smiling. Though daylight peeped through a gap in the curtains, the pressure between her thighs remained. Her body was warm, perspiring from the weight on top of her. Blinking again, she stared up into hungry eyes. The bearded face stared back down at her. A gasp escaped her.

Shao, returned to human form, was on top of her, his dark eyes dusky and glazed with hunger. He moved, making her aware of the hard dragon inside her, the sensation shot delicious heat into her entire sex.

Without thinking, her hands flew to his hips and her lips parted. She cried out softly in pleasure.

But Shao leaned over and stifled the small noise with a kiss...

\* \* \* \* \*

Jie's eyes shot open. The first thing he saw was Shao on top of Meg, Shao's narrow body between her spread creamy thighs. Shao's arms bridged her upper body, his hands pressed into the mattress on either side of her, his arm muscles flexed as he kissed her. Her small hands rested on his hips. From the angle of Shao's and Meg's bodies, Jie could clearly see the scar on Shao's back, the same one he had.

At first Jie thought he was dreaming. He blinked. Morning sun peeked through a small slit in the drawn curtains.

Meg whimpered, a muted sound against Shao's lips.

Jie wasn't dreaming. He stared, unable to move. Moments later, Jie realized he could taste Meg on his lips, as if *he* were kissing her, not Shao.

Shao lifted his mouth from Meg's and looked down at her, braced himself with his hands pressed into the mattress on either side of her. He thrust his hips forward, causing her body to move. Her breath hitched softly.

A possessive streak stabbed Jie. He meant to reach out, to push Shao off Meg. But pleasure seared his dragon, immobilizing him.

Shao thrust again.

Jie experienced the warm, slippery tightness of Meg's cave, as if *he* were inside her. He continued to stare, becoming aware of the small pressure on his hips, as if her hands rested on him, not on Shao.

Shao bent down again and captured Meg's left nipple in his mouth.

Jie tasted the light yin musk of the tightening bud and felt the silky, rubbery texture of Meg's nipple against his own tongue.

What the hell was happening? Last night hadn't been like this. His experience of Meg's body had been his own, not Shao's.

Shao thrust inside Meg again. His arm muscles flexed as he began a steady rhythm of thrusts inside her.

Pleasure gripped Jie's body, as if he, himself, were in the throes of making love to Meg. His gaze fell on the scar again and the reality hit him. He *was* Shao and Shao *was* him. The fact that there were two distinct men, two bodies and seemingly two personalities, was a mystery, a phenomenon generated by the manipulation of their life forces.

Meg was completely absorbed in Shao, not noticing Jie was in the bed. But Jie was no longer jealous. For her, there was only one man. He and Shao were, effectively, one man.

Shao looked over at Jie, as if suddenly remembering he was in the bed with them. He stared at Jie, his body going still even though he remained buried inside Meg.

Jie expected him to turn back to Meg and ignore him but he didn't.

To his surprise, Shao slipped his dragon from Meg's cave, eliciting a small sigh from her. With fingertips on Meg's cheek, he turned her face to look at Jie. Her dusky eyes, glazed with desire, lit on him and she smiled, not seeming surprised at all.

Shao's hands slipped to Meg's hips and he turned her over, maneuvering her onto her hands and knees. Then he leaned toward Jie and grasped his hand. This time, Jie let himself be led. His dragon was hard, pulsing, aching for release. He understood that whatever Shao asked of them was to help them heal, to restore his life force.

Shao tugged Jie to his knees. The movement brought the head of Jie's erect cock mere inches from Meg's ripe lips.

Without thinking, Jie slipped his hand into Meg's silky hair and inched toward her. As soon as his cock nudged her lips, she parted them and took him deep in her mouth. The moist warmth of her mouth enveloped his aching dragon, her lips slid along the taut shaft and her tongue grazed the length as she swallowed him.

Jie groaned and clutched her hair. It took all his discipline not to thrust his hips and drive his cock into her throat. He breathed raggedly and caressed Meg's hair. Her eyes were closed, her thick eyelashes rested on her cheeks.

She moaned suddenly. The tiny sound vibrated along the length of his cock. Her body jerked forward.

Jie looked up from under his heavy lids and saw Shao.

His twin was positioned behind Meg, hands grasping her hips. His dragon was obviously buried deep in her moist cave, for her body shifted forward from the impact of Shao's thrusting into her from behind.

The impact pushed Meg's mouth down Jie's cock. He sucked in his breath each time, his body immobile from the pleasure. Meg sucked him, Jie, in a rhythm with Shao's thrusting in and out of her. When Shao slowed down, her mouth moved more slowly. When Shao sped up, Meg's lips pumped Jie's cock in a heated rhythm.

The pleasure gathered deep in Jie's balls. He burrowed both hands deeper into her hair, still struggling not to pull on her.

Shao plunged into her again. Meg moaned. Her lips slid over Jie's shaft with intense friction. The impact from Shao's thrust made Meg swallow Jie's cock almost to the base. That was it. He came, the climax shuddered through his body. His fingers tightened in Meg's hair, his body powerless, tense and relaxed all at once as he emptied his yang cloud into her eager mouth.

Through his erotic haze, Jie heard Shao growl deep in his throat. Energy shifted in Jie's body, flowing like water from a faucet. Tingling darts of heat traveled down his cock, seeming to pour into Meg's mouth. Jie couldn't move, couldn't look up until the intense waves had passed but he saw Shao behind Meg.

Shao's skin was flushed dark, his eyes closed. His hands covered the soft swells of Meg's hips and he was still, as if absorbing the exchange of life force.

The tingling eventually ebbed. Jie's climax had passed and his dragon slipped from Meg's mouth. He sat on his heels and cupped Meg's cheeks.

Her eyes were closed and she was breathing heavily. A soft sheen of perspiration glowed on her forehead and upper lip. Jie brushed her cheeks with his thumbs and watched a lazy smile spread to her moist lips.

Shao grunted softly. Jie looked up and saw Shao looking at him. Shao had pulled out of Meg and knelt with his hands on her hips. He rose up, slid his hands up her sides and turned her gently onto her back. Meg looked up at Jie from where she lay against the pillows. Her eyes were half closed, the irises reflecting complete absorption in what was happening to her. Her hair fanned out on the pillows and she smiled up at him, her lips glistening from his seed.

Jie looked at Shao. To his surprise, Shao's dragon was still rock hard and shining with Meg's yin juices. Shao glanced at him for one second then settled between Meg's thighs again.

Shao moved his hips, guiding his cock to her opening. He pushed once again deep into her cave. Shao lowered his upper body down onto hers. He encircled her in his arms and dipped his tongue between Meg's soft, full, parted lips to lap up Jie's seed. Meg sighed. The sound echoed her complete surrender. She lay quietly under Shao, her body obviously weak with pleasure, while Shao tasted the insides of her mouth with deft strokes of his tongue.

Once again, Jie could taste her lips and the lingering tang of his yang cloud on her tongue, as if he were the one on top of Meg, kissing her. With each stroke of Shao's cock inside her, Jie felt the slippery yet tight inside of her cave massage his own dragon. His erection rose with the sensation of feeling buried inside Meg. He could even feel the muscles of his own thighs and buttocks clench and flex with Shao's movements. He also experienced Shao's deep-seated hunger, both physical and emotional, his clawing need for love and fulfillment.

His own need. The need that Shao embodied.

In that moment, any possessiveness that lingered inside Jie washed away and he watched Shao make love to Meg. Jie's gaze roved over Meg's body—lingered on her breasts, appreciated the way they bobbed and shifted underneath Shao.

Jie watched Meg's hands clutch Shao's hips and her thighs, soft and pale, pressed into Shao's sides. Small whimpers of pleasure escaped her throat and Jie could hear how close she was to coming.

Shao pumped harder inside her. Her breath hitched with each movement. In the next second, she clutched his hips and arched her back, her cries caught in her throat as an orgasm obviously plowed through her.

A growl vibrated in Shao's throat. He held Meg tightly to him, his body clenched. Jie felt the climax in his own dragon. He clutched the bedclothes, anchoring himself

against the nearly overwhelming waves. Again, energy shifted, thrummed between them. Jie's body tingled, swirling with life as yin and yang mingled inside him.

As Jie's climax passed, the energy simmered down and he grew calm. The same calming process seemed to be happening to both Shao and Meg also. Shao lay over Meg. His cheek rested in the hollow of Meg's shoulder and she caressed Shao's long hair.

Jie breathed heavily too. He lay on his side, watching them, unable to move or speak.

Shao rose up on his elbows and nuzzled Meg's cheek. She giggled softly, obviously tickled by his beard.

Jie smiled. He reached out and caressed her hair.

Meg turned to him. A contented glow covered her face. Her pale skin was flushed. Her lips were swollen from kisses and her eyes held lazy contentment. "I doubt everyone who travels to China gets to have a first day like I've had."

Jie chuckled and smoothed his fingertips across her soft cheek. "I'm certain you're correct about that."

Meg gazed up at Jie and put her hand over his, holding his palm against her cheek. Understanding registered in her eyes as she studied Jie's face. "It's been working on you, hasn't it? You seem...different. More relaxed."

Jie nodded. "I can't deny it. I felt everything he felt just now, as if Shao and I weren't separate beings but one being."

She squeezed his hand and then turned and pressed her lips into his palm.

They rested like that for a little while until Jie glanced at the clock on the bedside table. It read 11:00. They had only one hour before they were to meet Su Lin down in the lobby.

Jie leaned over and kissed Meg's lips. "I'm sorry, *ai ren*," he murmured, "But we must unfortunately get up. It's almost time to meet Su Lin."

Meg frowned and he could read the worry that seeped into her features, replacing the contentment that had been there. She nodded and turned back to Shao, stroked his hair gently. "Come, Shao," she said in a soft voice, "We have to get ready now. We have to show Su Lin that neither of you tried to hurt her."

Jie slipped off the bed and padded to the bathroom. He turned on the shower and relieved himself while waiting for the water to get hot. Sensing movement behind him, he turned.

Meg and Shao stood behind him. She smiled at Jie and rested a hand on Jie's shoulder. Her touch always warmed him, especially now when he was nervous about seeing his ex-wife.

Meg's green eyes sparkled. "Is it all right if we join you?" She was being so sweet and loving. It couldn't be easy for her, knowing she was about to meet a woman he'd

been with for years before her. He nodded, his blood already heated again from her lush naked body close to his. "Of course. Please do."

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

If Meg was going to face Jie's ex-wife, she was first going to have more of these scrumptious men surrounding her while they were still naked. The shower spray was deliciously hot and steamy and she loved the way the water made both Jie's and Shao's ebony hair shine like a raven's wings.

She poured shower gel into her palm and lathered it over Jie's muscled back.

He smiled at her and lifted his arms. She slid her soapy hands around his sides to his underarms and then over his broad chest. Behind her, a pair of soapy warm hands skated warmly over her back, strong fingers slid over her wet skin.

Meg closed her eyes and leaned in toward Jie. Her breasts fused against his wet chest muscles. "Mmm," she murmured. Tilting her face up, she rose up on her toes and pressed her lips to Jie's, licking the water from his lips. If this was heaven, she wanted eternity. Right now.

Jie groaned softly and parted his lips. He swirled his tongue hotly against hers. Behind her, Shao pressed the front of his body to her back. He cupped her hips in a firm hold and pushed his pelvis against her. The nudge of an erection slipped between her buttocks.

Jie grasped her upper arms gently and pulled away from their kiss. His dark almond-shaped eyes simmered. "Meg, we don't have enough time."

Shao's hands slid up her stomach and cupped her breasts before skating back down her waist to her hips. Firmly he pulled her back and slid one hand between her legs, spreading open her lower lips. The head of his dragon nudged the opening of her cave.

Unable to resist, Meg lifted her hips more.

He thrust, hard and smooth, into her already wet pussy

She gasped from the hot pleasure. Her eyelids fluttered, her lips parted. Instinctively, she reached for Jie and anchored her weight on his upper arms. At her touch, she saw Jie's eyes darken, simmering as he looked at her.

"All right," he breathed. "A few minutes." And slanted his wet lips over hers. His tongue invaded her mouth, sliding hotly against her tongue. He cupped one breast and squeezed her nipple between his thumb and index finger.

Meg moaned into Jie's mouth as her very bones melted. Shao's hands on her hips and Jie's hold on her arm were the only things keeping her from melting to the floor in a puddle of desire.

Jie's hand slid from her breast down her stomach, his wet fingertips leaving a hot trail of pleasure on her skin. He didn't stop until he'd reached her clit, swollen and

stretched from Shao's cock. Jie rubbed her clit in small, heated circles, pressing it against the hard shaft sliding in and out of her.

The friction sent jolts of pleasure through her pussy. Her knees nearly buckled but Shao had her anchored in his firm grip.

Jie pressed down again on her clit. Shao thrust hard. Each slide of his cock brought her closer. And then sparks. Meg squeezed her eyes shut, her body immobilized in that moment of sheer bliss.

Waves of orgasm radiated from her core, one after the other, intensified by each thrust of Shao's cock.

Her vaginal muscles squeezed him and he rammed into her hard. Jie held her close to his front and Shao flattened his chest against her back, hands anchored on her hips. She felt completely held, surrounded by man.

Shao groaned. He leaned over and pressed his lips to her shoulder as he came. He pushed into her in short bursts and Meg could feel his warm yang cloud fill her. His breath was hot on her wet skin and he panted as he came inside her.

Meg sighed, content to be sandwiched between Jie and Shao, her cheek resting on Jie's chest while she caught her breath. She sighed, smiling to herself as Shao's dragon softened and slipped out.

Jie's breathing was harsh too. He'd gotten hard again and tension coiled in his touch on her arms.

She tilted her face upward and looked at him. Droplets of water beaded off the planes of his cheeks and off his lips. He was beautiful. "What about you?" she breathed.

He kissed her lips softly and moved away. "Later today. After we've seen Su Lin."

\* \* \* \* \*

Su Lin looked as Jie had always known her. Legs elegant in sheer stockings and high heels. She almost never dressed in anything but a silk blouse, skirt and jacket. Her glossy raven hair was pinned up in its customary elegant bun. Even though Su Lin's back was to him in the seating area of the lobby she occupied, Jie would have known her, even after twenty years.

She'd been the first woman he'd ever loved. His heart sped up as they drew closer.

Su Lin seemed to sense their approach and turned. Her eyes widened and Jie saw her full lips part. She stood quickly, her purse clutched to her front as if someone would snatch it away, and stared at Jie. Her dark gaze rested on him for a moment and then darted to Meg and Shao in turn.

Jie stopped and turned to Meg. "I think it's best if you keep Shao a distance away until I make sure she won't panic."

Meg glanced at Su Lin with a look that radiated both fear and caution. Jie sensed Meg's worry and his heart squeezed but there was not time for assurances now. Meg would have to trust that he loved *her*.

Meg nodded. "I understand." Her arm was linked through Shao's and she kept him pulled close to her side.

Jie glanced at Shao. The *lang ren* stared at Su Lin, with the wary look of a frightened animal. Jie sensed Shao's fear of Su Lin and as if the memory were Jie's own, he remembered how Su Lin had screamed and run from Shao. In his most desperate moments, Su Lin had threatened him and then let police drag him off to jail. She'd responded to his need only with fear, not with understanding. "I won't let her take you away again, Shao," he murmured.

With a final gentle caress on Meg's back over her blouse, Jie walked toward Su Lin again and stopped a few feet away from where she stood. A sudden onslaught of mixed emotions rendered him unable to speak. He worked to gather himself against the churning of shame and guilt Su Lin always elicited, a stark contrast to the passionate tenderness that Meg brought out in him.

Facing his ex-wife in that moment, Jie thought perhaps Su Lin's nature had always been this way, even before they ever met. Perhaps he wasn't quite as guilty of deficiency as he'd believed himself to be.

He cleared his throat. "Is Xun Ju with you?"

She shook her head. "No. He's in Japan on business."

Silence.

He indicated the sofa on which she'd been sitting. "Please."

Slowly, she lowered herself back down while he sank into the nearby chair. Glancing quickly over his shoulder, he saw that Meg and Shao had gone to another sitting area. Side by side they waited on one of the sofas, holding hands.

Su Lin watched him for another moment. "You never told me you had a twin brother." Mild accusation laced her tone.

He cleared his throat. "That's because I didn't know until now." He'd reflected on this meeting and on whether to tell Su Lin the actual truth but had decided against it. She already thought ill of him. There was no need to give her more fuel. "As you know, my parents spent most of their time in Beijing, leaving me alone with Li. They could easily have raised him here or have put him up for adoption without anyone else's knowledge."

That response seemed to satisfy her. She nodded, her sharp features relaxing a bit. The adoption ploy could certainly explain the wild nature of Shao's speech and behavior. It could also explain why Su Lin would have felt so deeply that he was Jie.

However, it didn't explain how Shao would have known Su Lin.

Jie braced himself for the inevitable question.

"How did he know *me*?"

Jie leaned back, his forearms on the armrests of the chair. "That is more mysterious. I can only suppose that being an identical twin, we would be connected so deeply that his intuition would have drawn him to you." He shook his head. "Beyond this, I have

no other answer." He looked at her. "One thing I'm positive of, Su Lin, is that he wasn't trying to hurt you. He was lost. He can't speak properly and was frightened."

She took a deep breath. "Well, he frightened me."

Jie bowed his head. "It won't happen again. You have my word. I've taken responsibility for him, now that I know he exists." He glanced away and then back, bowing his head. "I am sorry. For everything. I've never meant harm."

Su Lin was quiet and the only sounds were the sounds of people moving about in the lobby and the clinking of glasses and murmurs of conversation in the nearby restaurant.

"I'm sorry too," he heard her say.

He glanced up. She was looking over at Shao and Meg now. "This is the fiancée you mentioned?"

Jie looked at Meg. Their gazes met and Meg smiled. Just seeing her there, knowing she loved him, warmed his entire being. He couldn't help smiling back. "Yes," he said softly. He turned back to Su Lin. "Though we haven't set a date yet. I'm taking her to meet Li."

Su Lin nodded then turned back to him. "I see Chinese blood in her."

Jie started. Su Lin's comment had been surprisingly open. Thankfully, there was no judgment in the tone, just observation. He nodded. "Her grandfather was Chen Lem Kin, Li's friend from the Shaolin Temple."

Su Lin looked at him, her eyes wide. "I see."

"I was in America...on some business...and I met her. In Boston's Chinatown." There was no need to tell Su Lin that at the time, he'd gone there to protect her from another *lang ren* who was coming to claim her as his mate.

Su Lin nodded. "I wish you happiness, Jie." Slowly, she rose to her feet. "I am grateful that you took the time to explain this to me. I won't bother you again. Now, I must go."

A pang squeezed Jie's heart. An emotion he couldn't understand passed through him. "Do you wish to meet Meg?"

Su Lin's gaze darted to Shao and Meg and she appeared to reflect. "I see that your brother fears me. I understand and I think that to meet her you'd have to bring him along. I don't wish to put him in that position. But please, give her my regards and well wishes for your marriage."

Jie couldn't help staring at Su Lin for several moments before answering. "I will, thank you." He held out his hand. "Goodbye, Su Lin."

She took his hand with just the grip of her elegant fingers and squeezed it briefly before releasing him. She lingered a moment longer, looking as if there was more she wanted to say but then changed her mind. "Goodbye." She turned and maneuvered her way gracefully from the seating area. Her heels clicked on the floor as she walked out the front door of the hotel lobby.

Jie watched her leave and heaved a deep sigh.

"Jie?"

A soft touch on his arm made him look up. He hadn't heard Meg approach but her mere gaze flooded him with comfort. He put his hand over hers. "I'm all right," he murmured.

With her hand still on his arm, he rose from the sofa, looking from her to Shao. Warmth flooded him and he was glad that they were both with him. He took another deep breath. A burden had been lifted and he smiled. "What do you say we have some lunch and then I'll show you a bit of the city before we go up to Xiahe?" *And before we make love again*, he thought silently.

Meg returned his smile. "I'd say that sounds wonderful."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Moscow, Russia*

"You had my brother killed, you fucking coward." The tall *bodark*, an identical copy of his now dead brother, leaned over the desk, his teeth bared at Yelin.

Yelin rose from his desk chair. He now occupied the office that had once belonged to Boris' brother, Ivan. Boris was right, of course. Yelin had led the alpha to the Chinese *bodark* who'd fought Schenko to the death. But Yelin couldn't let this other Schenko get to him, either.

Yelin had known all along this moment would come and had intended to feign apologies and regrets at Ivan Schenko's death. But seeing Schenko's double caused every moment of pain Yelin had ever experienced over Lilya's death to resurge, along with his anger and desire for revenge. "Schenko killed my sister. He deserved what he got."

Boris Schenko lunged at him and grabbed Yelin's throat. Yelin's guards, loyal to Yelin now by *weyre* law, not to Boris' dead twin, grabbed Schenko, one on each side. The scene so resembled the one when Yelin had been in Boris Schenko's position that Yelin chuckled, watching the same goons who'd once obeyed Ivan Schenko now obey the *beta* who'd had him killed and taken over his pack.

"Let me go, you fuckers!" Boris' growling voice rose above the club music pounding in the background outside the office. "You answer to *me* now. Ivan was my brother."

Yelin chuckled again and lit a cigarette. *Weyres* were like genies let out of a bottle. The one who'd released the genie was master, regardless of other circumstances, just as the pack followers were loyal to their *alpha* by virtue of his position, regardless of how the other pack members felt about him personally. "I'm afraid it doesn't work that way, Schenko. You'll have to kill me in order to gain their loyalty and obedience. Every

*bodark* worth his fangs knows that." Yelin tapped the ashes into the dish on his desk and gloated at the snarling man. "Let him go."

His goons released Ivan's brother, who straightened his jacket and t-shirt with angry tugs.

Boris pointed at him. "You waited until I was in prison, didn't you? You knew I couldn't protect my brother."

The bastard could believe that if he wished. Yelin had just waited until his astrological chart had showed him the Chinese *bodark*. "Whatever. He's gone now and justice has been done for my sister." No justice would soothe Yelin's grief over his beautiful sister. She'd committed suicide over that bastard Ivan.

A gleam came into Boris' eye. "Lilya, wasn't it?" He chuckled, a smug sound that set Yelin's teeth on edge. "Da. I remember her. Ivan shared her with me once or twice. She was nothing special. An ordinary lay. No wonder he got rid of her."

Anger burned in Yelin's gut and he let out a string of curses. "Get him out of here." He puffed on his cigarette while Yuri and Mikhail grabbed Boris again and dragged him, kicking and screaming threats and curses. The struggling *bodark's* voice finally faded into the noise of the dance club around him.

Yelin took one last drag on his cigarette and smashed the butt into the dish. "Fuck," he muttered. Truthfully, he hadn't given one thought to Ivan Schenko's brother at the time he'd planned his revenge. What had it mattered? Lilya's death had consumed him and he hadn't had a moment's peace until the Chinese *bodark* had fought Schenko. The Chinese one had been quite the warrior, maneuvering the fight so that Schenko impaled himself on the shards of a broken plate glass window. There was no fiercer opponent than a *bodark* defending his mate and the Chinaman had responded beautifully to the threat on his woman.

Yelin shook his head. He knew Boris Schenko wouldn't rest until he'd avenged his brother's death and taken back the alpha position. The Moscow pack was so *mafioso* it was nauseating. Even so, Yelin too, loved power and was not willing to give it up so easily. Unfortunately, he wasn't as physically strong as Schenko. If Yelin was going to survive the inevitable attempt on his life from Boris Schenko, he needed someone to fight for him again. Someone strong. Someone with a hunger to kill. Someone whose woman was being threatened....

A threat. To a woman. Ahh!

Of course!

The scattered pieces of a plan started to fall into place. Convince Boris Schenko to kill the *bodark* who killed Ivan. Convince the Chinese *bodark* that the brother of Ivan Schenko, his felled opponent, now was claiming his mate. Result—fight. Chinese *bodark* kills Russian *bodark*. Yelin stays *alpha*. No more Schenkos to deal with. Ever.

Brilliant.

Yelin unlocked his desk drawer and pulled out his charts. He spread the painted cloth over the desk surface and studied the colored squares and writings. Hmm. It

appeared that the *bodark* he sought was no longer in Boston but back in China, back in the area he'd first left to go and claim the blonde Chinese girl as his mate. Damn. More traveling but it was unavoidable.

Yuri and Mikhail came back into the office. "He's gone now," Yuri informed him, taking his post by the door.

"Go get him again and bring back here."

"What?"

Yelin held up a hand. "I have an idea. But you must bring him back here first."

Yuri nodded. "I'll go. Let Mikhail stay here in case anyone else unwanted shows up."

Yelin grinned and reached for his pack of cigarettes. "Excellent. And please tell Mr. Schenko that if he comes back, it will be very worth his while."

\* \* \* \* \*

A rickety bus brought Meg, Jie and Shao to Xiahe from the airport.

Meg watched the main street of the town pass by the dirty bus windows. It looked very much like any street in Chinatown with storefronts with Chinese lettering and the curved Oriental roofing above.

The bus stopped at the curb and they descended. The dry air was cooler here than it had been in Beijing and Meg could see the tall dusty hills with patches of green scrub rising in the distance behind the town.

Jie carried their suitcase. "Come, this way. My godfather lives on the outskirts of town, facing the prairie."

Meg followed him with Shao close at her side. He was never more than a couple of feet from her wherever they went. Whether it was the bit of sightseeing they'd done in Beijing before traveling up to Xiahe, eating in a restaurant or bathing, Shao never let Meg out of his sight.

After five minutes of walking, the town gave way to stone walls and tiny alleyways. Cooking smells of oil and chilies wafted in the air, mingled with the sounds of children playing and the music from radios. Laundry flapped in the breeze on lines behind small apartments.

Jie led them a bit farther and the housing thinned, replaced by small huts of brick and white stucco with red tile roofs scattered over a field, a dirt road connecting them. The same scrubby hills rose behind them, making the area feel enclosed in spite of its vastness. In the distance, further down the road, Meg saw the prairie with its tall grasses.

Shao looked at it too and Meg sensed his anticipation. She remembered that he'd been here with Master Li before making his way down to Beijing on foot. No small accomplishment.

She remembered too that Jie had run through these fields, as a little boy and then, later, as a wolf. Her heart squeezed as she tried to imagine him at eight or nine years old, running and playing.

Alongside Shao, she followed Jie up the walkway to one small hut. Jie knocked on the door and then softly pushed it open.

"Li *sifu*?" Jie stepped over the threshold. His heartbeat sped up. Since he was a little boy, he'd always worried that one day he'd walk in and his godfather wouldn't be there. That fear had never left him.

Master Li stepped around the corner, his old face wreathed in a smile. "Jie, welcome home." Jie's godfather came forward and as he drew closer, Jie could see that the old man's eyes were misted over.

Relief washed through Jie and he smiled. His godfather was the best friend he'd ever had.

Master Li reached up and cupped Jie's cheeks, bowing to him. Jie returned the gesture and Li touched his forehead to Jie's. His godfather had always used the Tibetan greeting, preferring warmth of feeling to the conventional Confucian restraint.

"Hello, Li *sifu*," Jie breathed, unable to keep out the emotion that suffused his voice. "I've missed you."

Master Li touched the fingertips of both hands to Jie's cheeks and Jie felt his own eyes tear up. After several moments, he straightened and beckoned to Meg. She came to his side and he drew her toward his godfather. Shao stood close behind her. "Godfather, this is Meg, Chen's granddaughter."

Li's dark eyes widened and he fixed her with a faraway yet perceptive gaze. He bowed his head. "Lem Kin's granddaughter. I'm honored."

Meg smiled shyly and Jie felt a surge of warmth for her. He hadn't expected to feel so proud to present her to his godfather. "I'm so happy to meet you, Master Li. Lao Ye spoke so often and so fondly of you."

Li smiled and bowed his head again to her. When he looked up, his gaze fell on Shao. The elderly man stared at him a moment then turned to Jie, his lips slightly parted in obvious surprise. "You found him."

Jie nodded. "Yes, *sifu*."

Li took a step toward Shao and Meg moved aside. Shao gazed at Li and then dropped to his knees and touched his forehead to the ground at Li's feet.

Jie's heart surged at the deep show of respect. Shao embodied Jie's rawest, heartfelt emotions and drives. His love for his godfather had always been one of them.

Li waited silently for Shao to sit up. Shao remained kneeling, head bowed.

Li reached out and patted the top of Shao's head. "It's all right," he murmured, resting his hand on Shao's hair. Li looked at Jie. "Who is he?"

"It's rather difficult to explain, *sifu*."

His godfather reached out and touched Jie's arm. "Come, sit and have tea. You can tell me everything."

Jie nodded. "I'll put away our bag first."

"Of course. Show Meg and..." Li looked uncertainly at Shao.

"We call him Shao," Jie said.

Li nodded. Understanding shone in his eyes. "Shao. Show them your room and then come in."

Jie smiled. He felt again how much he'd missed his godfather. He led Meg and Shao to his small bedroom. "Meg, I grew up here, in this room, when I wasn't in Beijing."

Meg stepped over the threshold, her eyes still misted over. Somehow, having her see the room in which he'd spent so much time studying and dreaming and...mourning, made him feel even closer to her.

Shao stood in the doorway, looking hesitant.

Jie turned to him. Shao had been his and Meg's constant companion for days. Shao never spoke, yet Jie had begun to understand his grunts and growls and the expressions in his eyes. Jie couldn't help feeling...fond...of Shao. Strange. Somehow, it was easier to like that part of himself seeing Shao as a person—a man—in his own right. Shao possessed qualities Jie had always admired in others—like loyalty and openness—but hadn't ever believed he, himself, had.

Perhaps if he and Shao became one body again, he'd actually miss Shao. No doubt Meg would. Having two men at once must be unbelievably erotic for her. He'd once been with two women at the same time before he met Su Lin and the experience had been one he'd never forgotten.

Jie gestured to him. "Come in," he said in a gentle voice.

Shao stepped into the room and stood just inside, watching Meg. She had wandered over to Jie's desk and was studying the books and little objects he kept on it, not the least of which was an elaborately carved wooden Buddha.

Jie felt a swell of warmth in his heart, watching Meg examine his one prized earthly possession. The monks in Labrang monastery had given him the little statue when he was ten. They'd been very kind to him, the monks, letting him run around the prayer wheels and spin them in play. They never scolded him for it or forbade him to play hide and seek on the monastery grounds. Many of them had played with him and one monk, Lobsang, had taught him how to kick a soccer ball. They'd made him feel cared for and important.

No wonder he'd always fiercely opposed Su Lin's views about the Tibetan people.

Meg turned. "What a beautiful Buddha." At the sound of her voice, Shao stepped toward her and caressed her hair.

Jie smiled at her. There wasn't an ounce of unkindness in her and his heart swelled with love. He crossed over to the desk and stood close to her as he told her about the monks.

"That's very sweet," she said. "I hope you'll show me the monastery while we're here."

He put his arms around her and kissed her lips, aware of Shao's presence nearby. Shao was still stroking the fall of her hair down the ponytail she'd put it into for traveling. With each caress Shao's breathing grew heavier, the rasp of it filled the quiet room.

Jie pulled reluctantly away from their kiss. Meg's lips were so soft and tasted sweet. He'd been about to slide his hands down her back to her waist.

There wasn't time now to make love. He had to speak with his godfather and explain to him what had happened. Perhaps Li would have an insight that could further help them.

Through the open door, Jie heard the bubble and hiss of the teakettle on the small stove. That too, was a sound that had always comforted him, reminded him of his godfather's presence. Now he realized that as much difficulty and pain as there had been in his life, there had also been an equal amount of love. He just hadn't always been aware it.

He did now.

"Come, let's speak with my godfather," he said gently. It was hard to pull away from her, especially when her eyes took on that glaze of desire.

She nodded and reached for Shao's hand.

Jie led them back into the small main room where there was a sitting area. Li had removed the teakettle and was pouring steaming water into a pot. He asked Jie now to explain the situation. Jie watched his godfather's eyes darken with concern as Jie narrated what had happened in the prison. He explained the dynamics of his and Shao's *qi*, describing how their mutual contact with Meg seemed to be restoring the balance of life force.

Jie accepted a cup of fragrant tea from his godfather and watched the steam curl from the tiny cup. He bowed his head. "I'm sorry, *sifu*," he murmured. "I know now that I misused the *Tao*. I altered my life force out of self-hatred, not as an instrument of acceptance and peace."

Li patted him gently on the head as if Jie were still a boy. "I had faith that you would come to the truth, Jie. Lao Tzu says in the *Tao* that force is not the way at all. Deny the way of life and you are dead."

Jie nodded. He glanced at Meg. She was gazing at him over her cup. A gentle smile came to her lips.

"It seems that you now follow the path that will heal you," Li said.

Jie looked at him, grateful that his godfather hadn't scolded him for his misuse of the *Tao*. Why Jie would have feared such a thing, he didn't know. Li had never shown him anything but quiet patience, even in Jie's worst days as a hoodlum.

Li nodded. "Yes. Whatever you're doing to restore the balance of yin and yang, just continue."

Jie felt his cheeks tingle and bowed his head. "Yes, *sifu*," he murmured. "We certainly will."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

"He'd better fucking be here, Yelin." Boris Schenko mopped his thick neck with a bandanna.

Yelin chuckled. So...both Schenko brothers hated being out of the urban setting, even for five minutes. "Patience. He'll turn up."

People hurried by on either side of them and cars passed down the main street. Strange music and food smells wafted through the dry hot air.

"How do I know you're not tricking me? You're as slimy a *zhopoliz* as they come."

Yelin suppressed a growl. Schenko was not going to get away with calling the Moscow alpha an ass licker. But he didn't have to know that. Yet.

They wandered around the busy part of town for several hours, making repeated rounds, then sat in a café, watching the passersby. Yelin combed every male face for the *bodark* and sniffed the air for his scent. To no avail.

Boris Schenko leaned over the table, his lip curled. His eyes glowed with obvious desire for Yelin's blood. "I think you're trying to cheat me."

A momentary prickle of fear skittered down Yelin's spine. Schenko wasn't quite as credulous as his brother had been. Boris Schenko had done time in a Russian prison and was ten times tougher than Ivan had been. Add that to the fact that Boris had loved his brother and seethed with lust for revenge...

Yelin lit a cigarette. He struggled to appear calm and to repress the doubts that now nagged at him. Yelin knew that even if Schenko couldn't kill him as a *weyre*, the large *bodark* would have no hesitation to fuck him up in human form so that it would take a long while for him to heal.

Yelin tapped out the ashes off his cigarette and took a long puff, taking care not to blow his smoke in Schenko's face as he'd once done to Ivan. His hand trembled and he worked to keep his fingers still around his cigarette. Boris Schenko was not as easy to stay several steps ahead of mentally as Ivan had been. Bloodthirsty ferocity went a long way toward making Boris a frightening opponent.

Then an idea hit him. If the Chinese *lang ren* would not appear in the streets of his own accord, then he'd have to be flushed out. And what was the sure fire way to get him to come out? Howl.

His confidence somewhat restored, Yelin leaned over the table and explained his plan.

\* \* \* \* \*

Meg watched Jie across the dinner table. He looked deeply troubled and took small bites of his food in a way that indicated he ate only out of respect for his godfather. Of course, he was very serious most of the time but she sensed that a new worry had begun to weigh on him.

Master Li had set out a banquet of dumplings, fried tofu and noodles along with the tea. Shao had attacked the food with his customary relish and Meg too, had eaten almost two platefuls after a day of traveling but Jie had picked at the things she'd put on his plate, sipping his tea with that thoughtful expression he often got.

After their tea, Jie suggested going out for a walk to see the town before sundown but Meg was anxious to speak with him and hopefully, to allay his concern.

In the privacy of Jie's small room, she sat on the edge of the bed. Shao knelt on the floor near her, resting his cheek on her thigh. She smiled down at Shao and stroked his long hair, loving the sleekness of it beneath her fingertips. A moment passed and she turned her attention back to Jie. "Jie, what's bothering you? I sense that something's wrong. Something new."

He pulled out the desk chair and sat facing her and Shao. His hand rested on the surface of his small desk. "It's not something I would have thought to be concerned about in a million years but I am." He took a deep breath, a sheepish grin coming to his lips. "I'm worried that...you'll miss Shao...you know, if...when...he returns...here." He tapped his chest and shifted in his chair. He gestured to Shao's kneeling figure. "Maybe it's better *this* way."

Meg's pale cheeks flushed and she looked down. Her immediate response made him guess that similar thoughts had crossed her mind. Mild jealousy burned inside him and he braced himself for what she might say.

When she looked up again, she was smiling. "Jie, I can't imagine there is a better man in the world than you."

Jie bowed his head. "Thank you, Meg."

"You're welcome." Then a shadow passed over her pretty face. "Jie," she said softly, "you do realize that when you and Shao are...reunited, that, well, the chances are you'll still be a..." She trailed off and her sudden anguish filled the room with its force.

Jie sighed. How terrible that he'd put such fear into Meg that he'd leave her. "Things are different now, Meg. I...like Shao. I don't feel enmity toward that part of me anymore."

Her eyes widened and a light came into them.

He hurried on to explain. "And even if I didn't feel this way, I can't live without you, Meg. I know now the wolven half of me would never hurt you. I'd tolerate him simply for that reason."

Tears shimmered suddenly in her eyes. "You mean you won't leave me?"

"That's what I mean."

Meg's closed her eyes, forcing the tears to roll onto her pale cheeks. "Thank God," she whispered. Opening her eyes, she smiled and smoothed back Shao's hair in a way that made him raise his head from her lap and look up at her. "Shao, did you understand what Jie said?"

He nodded then rose up and pressed his lips to Meg's. Meg nearly melted on the spot. Her eyes fluttered closed at the delicious feel of Shao's soft full lips against hers. When he pulled away, the lack of contact made her eyes open. He was staring at her, his dark gaze sweet and liquid.

Shao put his hand on his chest, patted it several times and then turned and pointed to Jie.

To her, Shao's message was clear. How she understood his gestures so clearly, was mysterious but she did. Shao knew he needed to go back to Jie.

"It's not natural for you to be separate," she murmured.

Jie's eyes widened and he stared at her. "But you'll still miss him."

She returned his steady gaze. "I won't have to miss him if you'll let him come out."

Jie bowed his head. "Thank you. I'll do my best."

She smiled at him. If it was possible to love Jie more than she did in that moment, she couldn't imagine it. "In the meantime, we still owe Shao some *qi*. And I need a bath." She rose from the bed. Shao, of course practically leapt to his feet, as if afraid that Meg would abandon him.

She looked at Jie, giving him a suggestive smile. "Coming?"

He chuckled and rose slowly to his feet. "You haven't seen the bathroom yet. Shao will barely fit in there with you, never mind the three of us. But I think he'll try anyhow."

Meg laughed. "All right. But you'd better be here when I get out."

Jie crossed the small bedroom in three steps and reached out to cup her cheeks. His eyes locked with hers before his gaze roved down to her lips. He leaned into her and pressed the softest of kisses to her lips. The light sensual contact sent a shiver of desire right down to her toes. She still couldn't believe that she, Meg Philips, the girl who'd had one boyfriend in her whole life, now had this gorgeous incredible man—well, these two gorgeous incredible men—panting over her.

Jie lifted his mouth from hers and his fingertips slipped from her cheeks. "I will spend a bit of time with my godfather. We have much catching up to do."

\* \* \* \* \*

Meg smiled as she surveyed the bathroom. Jie had certainly been right. The tiny white-tiled room had just enough space for the sink, toilet and shower, never mind room to turn around. Almost like the small lavatory in the plane.

She stepped inside and Shao pushed in behind her, crowding her to the wall as he shut the door. She laughed. "Shao! There's no room for both of us."

He spun around and pinned her against the wall, a hand on either side of her head. She giggled, a bit breathless and gazed at him. Mischief twinkled in his almond-shaped eyes. The velvety darkness of the pupils mesmerized her.

Her laughter died and she stared into his eyes. Warm tendrils of desire curled through her middle with each pulse of Shao's breath on her lips. His musky scent permeated the small space and his full lips, slightly parted, were so close to hers she could have darted her tongue out and licked that deliciously plump bottom lip of his.

Come to think of it... She tilted her face closer.

His breath caught softly.

She closed her eyes and traced the tip of her tongue over the dusky swells of Shao's bottom lip.

A groan vibrated in his throat and he pressed into her, closing the narrow space between their bodies. The hard swell of his groin brushed her pubic bone through their clothing...back and forth. Each grind of his pelvis against hers ignited her more and she pushed her tongue past the seam of his lips.

A soft growl vibrated in Shao's throat and he closed his lips around her tongue, sucking it like the most delicious food.

Mmm. Shao made her feel so wanton, so uninhibited. Hungry to feel his bare chest, she worked open the buttons of his baggy shirt and slid her palms over the smooth hard muscles. His small dark nipples pebbled against the pads of her fingertips. He groaned again and took her mouth in a full kiss, tongue plunging hotly against hers.

She slid her hands to the sides of his back. The hard lean muscles flexed under her touch. That part of his body was so smooth, so masculine, she wanted to touch every inch of it. She traced the lines of muscle that ran up his sides, all the way to his armpits. Her thumbs brushed the soft dark hair in the musky warm recesses. His wild male scent flared at her exploring touch, fueling her need.

Shao nibbled her lips then moved along her jaw, down the side of her throat, his fingers struggling with the frog buttons of her blouse. She managed to pull her hands from his bare torso long enough to help him with her buttons, then the hook of her bra.

Shao gazed hungrily at her bare breasts. He cupped them, squeezing just enough to heat her whole body. Her sex was already slippery and throbbing and she sagged against the wall. She closed her eyes, her body craving Shao's cock buried deep inside her.

The sudden release of pressure on her breasts caused her eyes to fly open. Shao was grinning at her, his eyes gleaming. She looked down, just in time to see his baggy pants drop around his ankles. He stepped out of them and kissed her again. He pushed her blouse down her arms, let it drop to the floor, then hooked his index fingers under the straps of her bra and gently yanked it off her.

She undid her trousers, pushed them past her hips, underwear and all, then stepped out of them.

Meg and Shao stood facing each other. Meg watched Shao's hungry gaze rove over her body. He growled softly. His dark eyes simmered. She smiled and let herself peruse his magnificent body in the same lustful way.

Shao's smooth muscles gleamed under the harsh light of the single bulb over the sink. His erection jutted full and hard from his ebony pubic hair. Meg felt powerless to do anything but stare at him. Even the narrow, dark trail of hair from his belly button downward, aroused her.

Gripped suddenly by a wave of need, she launched herself at him.

Shao caught her, his hands wrapped around her waist and he pulled her against him. With their bodies like one, Shao leaned against the wall.

He was making her wild, unleashing her from deep within. She grasped his wrists and pinned them on either side of his head. His eyes widened, yet the hunger still sparkled in them. Strands of his long hair fell across his face and he panted lightly, watching her.

Meg leaned in and covered his lips with hers. He groaned softly and parted his lips. His eager response fueled her hunger for him. She danced her tongue against his, each lick more heated until their lips chafed together in a frenzy. Meg pressed against him, her breasts flattened against his chest. His dragon, full and hard, pushed against her pubic bone.

The contact sent a jolt of heat through her middle. She nipped his lower lip, then kissed a trail down his chin and pushed her lips into the underside of his jaw, breathing in his musky scent. He let her continue to hold his wrists. His breath stormed in her ear and his chest rose and fell with heavy breaths that brushed her already hard nipples with each inhalation.

Pushing closer against him, Meg slid her hands from his wrists, down the smooth skin of his inner arms, returned to the flaring muscles of the sides of his back. Wanting him deep inside her, she lifted her leg and started to wrap it around his hip, hindered by the wall behind him.

Shao growled softly again and lowered his hands to her shoulders, his thumbs brushed back and forth across her skin. His hard dragon twitched against her stomach.

She moved a bit closer, undulating against him in silent demand.

Suddenly, gently, with pressure on her shoulders, he drew her back.

Surprised, Meg looked into his eyes. The dark pupils simmered and his face was flushed a darker shade of gold. He released one shoulder and patted his hand over his heart again, then pointed in the direction of the bedroom. His full lips worked as if he were trying to speak.

"What is it?" she said softly. Had she done something wrong?

"J...J..."

Her breath hitched softly. Shao was trying to speak!

"Jie." The syllable came out in a hoarse, scratchy voice, obviously unaccustomed to human speech.

She stared at him. "Shao, you spoke."

His eyes widened. "Jie," he said again.

She frowned. "Are you worried about him?"

Shao took several panting breaths, as if trying to speak were exhausting him. He pointed again. "Jie." And then to himself, crossing two fingers of his hand.

Then she understood. The sensation was strange, as if he'd spoken an entire sentence. "You and Jie must be together when we..." she broke off, suddenly, inexplicably abashed.

He nodded.

"Of course, I understand."

Shao looked at her with a hesitant expression, as if worried he'd upset her. But then he smiled. He kissed her and picked up her hand.

She let Shao lead her to the shower and opened the faucets. Her pussy still pulsed hard from lack of release.

Once under the hot spray, Meg wet a washcloth and lathered it with soap. She smoothed it across Shao's back, slid it up and down his muscles, loving the sheen of his golden skin with the water dripping off it. "Don't worry, Shao, I'll behave myself until we get back in the room with Jie."

When she'd finished, he took the cloth from her and lathered it with more soap. He moved her from under the spray and washed her as she'd done to him, over her back and under her breasts. The cloth rasped pleasantly against her skin, brushed her nipples. The pleasure made it increasingly difficult to keep her hands from roaming everywhere on Shao's naked muscular body that she wanted them to.

To her surprise, he slid the cloth down between her thighs, gently washed between the folds of her yin cave. The brush of the cloth against her clit made her gasp. Shao gently turned her around and dipped the cloth into the crevice between her buttocks, pressing gently on the tight bud.

Suddenly, the wet cloth hit the floor of the tub and Shao turned Meg gently and held her back to the spray. He smoothed one hand over her buttocks, as if to make sure all the soap rinsed away but then slipped several fingertips down the crevice between them.

Meg caught her breath. This was an unexplored part of her but no less sensitive or enjoyable.

Shao's gentle touch caressed her skin just inside her buttocks, sending darts of heat through her core. He slid his hand all the way forward, skimmed along the length of her slit and back to her butt. His fingertips found the tiny hole and caressed it.

Ohhh. The sensation was most delicious. She closed her eyes and felt her body relax into Shao's gentle exploration. He pushed one fingertip into the puckered bud with just enough pressure to penetrate her. The small invasion weakened her more and she grew languid in Shao's arms.

He braced her with a gentle arm across her rib cage and continued to push his finger in deeper. Another finger probed the opening of her cave, intensifying the delicious sensation in her behind.

She sighed, now unable to support her pleasure-saturated body.

Shao held Meg more firmly and pushed his finger in all the way, moving it around in tight circles. His other finger slid deep inside her pussy, now slick with her juices. Pleasure thundered through her body and all she could hear were her own panting breaths mixed with the sound of Shao's low growl and the gush of the shower spray.

Shao growled again, the sound rumbling from deep in his throat, vibrating against her skin. He pushed a second finger into her tight back hole. The sensation of fullness tingled with delicious heat and she clutched at his forearm. Her fingers dug into his skin as the beginnings of an orgasm spiraled through her.

Shao leaned into her, pulled her close against him. Her wet skin fused with his and his strong yet gentle hold anchored her against the vigorous pumping of his fingers in her tight passage. The press of his hard cock only increased the blaze building in her body.

Time seemed to stop, punctuated only by the thundering water. Shao's skilled fingers in both her openings at once yanked one wave of pleasure after another from her body. Just as she was about to come, he stopped and withdrew his hand.

She yelped softly at the sudden absence of his fingers. Her body pulsed and throbbed without release. Still, he held her against him and his erection pushed hungrily into her backside.

She turned in his arms and looked at him. Several moments seemed to pass before she could breathe normally, much less speak. Shao too, was panting and his eyes burned with a mixture of lust and mischief. He pointed again, jabbed his finger through the air. The message, as before, was clear.

Meg smiled. Her sex and ass both pulsed wildly. "All right. Let's dry off and go to Jie."

\* \* \* \* \*

Meg peeked out the bathroom door. She heard Jie's and his godfather's voices murmuring quietly in conversation in the main room. Knowing they wouldn't see her and Shao, she led Shao quickly out of the bathroom, both wrapped in their towels and into the bedroom where they sat and waited.

Jie came in after a few minutes. A look of hunger slid into his gaze when he saw her in her towel. "Good news," he said, his voice slightly husky. He knelt in front of her. "My godfather wants to return to Boston with us."

Meg threw her arms around him, aware that her towel slipped off her breasts. "Jie, that's wonderful! I'm so happy. He can have Lao Ye's bedroom."

He caressed her back. His fingertips grazed her skin pleasantly. "Thank you, Meg," he murmured, his voice distinctly husky now. He pulled back and looked at her, his gaze slid down to her bare breasts. "Now, you have me crazy with hunger for you." He leaned forward and nuzzled her breast. When he looked back up at her, a tiny grin tugged at his lips and his brown eyes simmered. "Don't think I couldn't feel what was going on in the bathroom," he said softly.

She flushed warmly under erotic attention. God, with a mere look and touch, Jie made her feel so beautiful.

"My godfather also told me something else." His voice sounded far away. Definitely distracted.

Under Jie's look, her nipples tingled, ached for his touch. "What did he tell you, Jie?"

Behind her on the bed, Shao pressed closer to her. His body still radiated steamy warmth from their shower.

Jie held out his other hand. "This bottle." He seemed shy about continuing.

Meg took it from him and pulled out the tiny cork stopper. The scent of delicate, meadow herbs wafted from the bottle.

"It's oil," Jie said. "My godfather said that...we should use it to... Shao...and I," he paused and cleared his throat. "Shao and I must mix our yang inside you at the same time."

Meg caught her breath. She turned to Shao. The way he'd pleased her in the shower, the delicious way his fingers had stretched open the tight hole of her backside. As if he'd known...

Shao reached out and pulled away her towel. The heat from both men's bodies danced around her bare skin. Jie moved closer to her and she turned back to him. Jie's gaze darkened and he parted his sensuous lips. She saw him glance at Shao.

The two men locked gazes and Meg felt the energy swirl in the air between them. A gentle vibration, both calm and sexually charged, radiated around her, into her and she grew pliant again, as she had in the shower.

She sagged forward and Jie caught her, held her gently in his arms. She tilted her head up, her eyelids heavy and parted her lips, silently demanded Jie's kiss.

"Meg," Jie whispered, his voice throaty, thick with desire. He brushed his lips across hers and then rained soft kisses down the side of her neck.

Shao took the bottle from her and tipped it so that the golden liquid pooled in the palm of one hand.

Jie lifted his lips from her neck and looked at her. "Come, Meg," Jie whispered. He pulled her against him, lifted her to her knees and kissed her again.

Meg's eyes fluttered closed. She reveled in this sensation of being surrounded, desired, pleasure by these men. She slid her tongue against Jie's as their kiss grew hotter.

The sudden warmth of oiled fingertips slid into the crevice of her buttocks and landed on her tight hole. The oil, warm from Shao's hand, emitted its scent as he smoothed it over the puckered skin, sending a cascade of pleasant tingling through the whole spot.

Her eyes fluttered closed. Sweet languor flooded her and she moaned softly into Jie's mouth.

Jie's kisses grew wilder, hotter. Meg could practically taste his yang fire and rose higher on her knees, her body already wanting both of them at once. The knowledge of what was happening was like the greatest, wildest wish being granted and she was going to savor every last second.

Jie moved in closer to her, so close his t-shirt brushed her hard nipples. An icy flash of heat tickled the hard nubs and she arched her back, moving back and forth to increase the sensation.

Jie groaned softly and pulled his mouth from hers. With his hands on her upper arms he bent down and tugged her nipple between his moist lips. He sucked sensuously on the hard bud, massaging it with soft strokes of his tongue.

Shao pushed an oiled finger inside her, wiggled it gently, then pushed deeper into her tight passage. The delicious invasion made her moan again and push her ass harder against his hand just as Jie's tongue flicked on her nipple.

She gasped, overwhelmed with pleasure. She tilted her head back and buried her fingers in Jie's hair.

Shao put a second finger inside her, stretching her in the most incredible way. The oil made his fingers glide effortlessly in her ass and tingling sparks of pleasure cascaded through her entire body.

For the first time, Meg felt the direct connection between Jie and Shao. A rhythm hummed between the two of them in which she was the center, the meeting place. The only thing she could do was give herself completely over to the blissful flow, to their hard bodies surrounding her, the potent maleness, the musky scent of her two men.

Shao pulled his fingers out of her and grasped her shoulders. He drew her pliant body back toward him. Her nipple slipped from Jie's mouth and Shao's erection now nudged at her backside.

"Jie." The softly growled syllable told Meg exactly what was to happen next. She looked at Jie whose dark eyes simmered, conveyed understanding.

Meg's breath caught softly. Her breasts rose and fell heavily with her panting. She reached out and slid her hand under Jie's shirt. His warm skin and hard muscles quivered under her hand.

Jie groaned softly. In one swift movement, he lifted his shirt up and off and dropped it aside. He paused, on his knees in front of her. He too, breathed heavily and his dark nipples were already tight.

Meg stared at his chest. She reached out again and smoothed her fingertips across it. Behind her, Shao slid his hands from her shoulders, down her back and caressed her hips. He continued to nudge at her bottom with the head of his cock, light, gentle jabs that only made her hotter.

She smiled. She couldn't help it. If she'd been given her most incredible dream, she wouldn't have imagined what was happening now. She wanted to make it last as long as possible.

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to Jie's chest. He sucked in a breath and gripped her arms, anchoring her. With the tip of her tongue, she slid a path over one side of his hard chest and traced the hard bud of his nipple. He groaned and whispered her name. Encouraged, she licked his nipple again and flicked her tongue over it the way he'd done to her. He moaned softly and tightened his fingers on her arms.

Behind her, Shao growled softly. He slid his cock between her buttocks, tilting his hips so that his shaft grazed the length of her slit. She moved against him but never lifted her mouth from Jie's chest. She was enjoying his taste too much.

With her hands on Jie's hips, she kissed a trail to the other side of his chest and did the same to his other nipple, licking and teasing it with the tip of her tongue until he clutched her arms.

The sense of feminine power was intoxicating and Meg slid her hands to the buttons of Jie's trousers. She worked them open and swirled her tongue over his hard chest at the same time. Her fingertips came in contact with the elastic of briefs and she trailed her touch over the thin cotton, teasing the rock-hard outline of his cock. Fueled by his sound, she slid her hand down further and cupped his balls. The firm sac filled her hand, weighed heavily against her palm and she squeezed gently.

Jie groaned and slid his hands into her hair. He brought her face up to his and closed his lips greedily over hers. Meg surrendered to the kiss, to the result of her wicked exploration of his body.

Jie kissed her deeply for several moments then pulled away and stood up to slip off his trousers and briefs.

Meg's gaze dropped to his naked lower body, watching as he revealed it. Her pussy throbbed with the anticipation as he slipped them off and stepped out of them, his erection bobbing free.

He climbed back on the bed and grinned at her. Now Meg could see Shao's spirit glitter in Jie's eyes. "Come here, my love," he crooned, his voice low and throaty. The

sound vibrated right to her core, made her vividly aware of her juices seeping freely from her yin cave.

Jie lowered himself onto his back. He reached his arms out to her.

Shao grunted and released her with a gentle push so she could climb onto Jie and straddle Jie's narrow hips.

Rising up slightly on her knees, she reached for Jie's erection. Lightly she wrapped her fingers around his thick dragon and caressed the silky skin.

"Now, Meg," Jie said, his voice a tight whisper. The plea in his voice sent a sliver of heat through her sex and she guided the head of his cock to her slippery entrance, maneuvering her hips enough to slip it in, just past the head.

She bent over him again and lowered herself down. Her breasts flattened against his chest and she closed her mouth over his, plundering the soft insides of his mouth with her tongue. She loved his unique flavor, smooth teeth and hot wet tongue against hers. The little bit of penetration made her hungry for more and she pushed down. His cock slid deep inside her, filled her and she couldn't help but to buck her hips.

Jie rested his hands on her hips. He groaned into her mouth. A low growl vibrated in his throat and the frustrated sound made her smile. Feeling wicked, she rose up until he slipped partway out, then teased him, moving her hips just enough to massage the head of his cock.

Another pair of hands closed around her upper arms. Shao. He urged her to slow down. The sensation of Jie's cock filling her and Shao's commanding yet gentle touch weakened her and she succumbed, lowered herself down, taking Jie in until their bodies touched.

She leaned over and kissed Jie again while Shao slid his hands down to her hips and pulled her backside up in the air.

Shao spread her buttocks and Meg felt the head of Shao's dragon nudge her tiny oiled opening.

Meg sighed into Jie's mouth. Her eyes fluttered closed against the delicious double pressure. Shao had spread the oil on his cock and the head slipped inside her. The pleasure rocked her body. Shao thrust, several gentle but quick jabs that pushed his cock into her, inch by inch. The hard shaft inside her tight passage increased the pleasure inside her pussy and instinctively she began to rock.

Shao pushed again, one firm thrust. His oiled cock sank all the way in.

The incredible fullness made Meg gasp. Both men's dragons filled her, stretched her, touched spots so deep inside she hadn't known they existed. The tingling and rubbing made her mindless with pleasure and she rocked against both cocks, losing herself completely in the double friction filling her body.

Jie levered up on his elbows and captured a nipple in his seeking mouth. He sucked it and she cried out. There was barely an inch of her body not being touched, licked,

filled somehow and she experienced a complete invasion of pleasure vibrating along every nerve ending in her skin.

Groping blindly, she found Jie's bulging upper arms and grasped. All pure female instinct now, she bucked her hips, ground her clit against the base of Jie's cock. Pleasure crested inside as her orgasm built quickly. Don't...come...yet...was all she could think. She forced herself to slow down. She wanted this to last forever.

Shao lightly grasped her hips, pulling her closer to his body. The abrupt movement made both cocks rub her hard. Pleasure exploded, radiated through her whole cave. She cried out from each crashing wave of release. Through her erotic haze, she saw Jie tilt his head back, his eyes closed as his warm seed gushed inside her.

Behind her, Shao thrust inside her. The scented oil they'd used released its flowery musk into the sex-warmed air, mingled with the musk of their joined bodies.

All too soon, her orgasm sent its last tiny spasms of bliss through Meg's body. She sank down onto Jie, her damp breasts fused to his heaving chest.

Shao was still inside her, his dragon hard, thrusting. She pushed her backside out for him as far as she could without letting Jie slip out of her.

Shao growled softly, his pleasure sounds cut softly through the musk-scented air. Several short, fast thrusts and he groaned, a long low sound that lasted with every hot spurt of his yang cloud into her tight passage.

Lightly Shao collapsed on her back, sandwiching her satisfied body between his and Jie's. She closed her eyes and sighed, contented, surrounded by the warmth of their two muscular bodies. Their powerful male scent and the press of their strength against her made her feel almost drunk.

She wasn't afraid this time when Shao rolled away from her and dropped the floor, his body stiff, his breath pumping in hard gasps. The change. "Jie," she whispered, "should this be happening now?"

He sat up and urged her off. "I don't know, Meg. I'm sorry." Immediately she slipped off the bed and knelt by Shao, watching Jie go to his other side and feel Shao's pulse. Finally he looked up at her. "He's definitely healed. His organs and systems are strong again."

"But you...and he—"

A strangled growl from Shao pulled her attention. Though she couldn't take the pain of the change away, she stroked his hair and waited with him through it.

Jie lowered Shao's hand, now partway to a beast's claw, to the floor then watched the process with her. Finally, when Shao was halfway changed, Jie looked up at her. A sheepish expression passed through his dark eyes. "I was trying to see this process through your eyes, Meg."

She returned his gaze. "Through my eyes?"

He nodded. "Yes. Through the eyes of someone who loves me."

Meg's eyes filled with sudden tears. The softness in his attitude toward his lycanthropy moved her. "What do you see?"

He glanced at Shao and back at her. "I'm not completely certain," he said softly, "But I don't see it as bad."

She smiled at him.

Shao lay quietly, catching his breath. The change was always difficult, especially since he'd split off from Jie all those months ago and he always needed a bit of time to recover his breath and adjust to the large beast that his body became. Several minutes passed before he felt able to rise on all fours and shake himself out as he always needed to do.

Meg was right there when he rose. Her sweet scent, mingled with the musk of yin from her sex shivered through him. He stepped toward her and licked her face, adoring the sound of her laughter when his long tongue tickled her skin. She also loved when he sniffled into her ear so he did it now, enjoying her cascade of giggles.

A few minutes of petting and playing and then it was time to go out onto the prairie. Shao's wolfen body and soul could no longer ignore the need to run wild through the tall grasses, chasing down the scents of small animals he always caught wind of out there.

He licked Meg's cheek affectionately one last time, then turned and went to the closed bedroom door. He whined and pawed at the space between the door and the threshold.

Jie threw on his pants and let Shao out the bedroom and then the front door of the bungalow. Dusk wasn't quite over and a few stars shone in the darker portion of the sky.

Shao looked up at Jie and whined again, wishing he could speak in words. He wanted Jie to run with him, alongside him, the friend he'd craved for so long.

Jie smiled at him. His expression showed that he understood. "Go on, Shao. One day we'll run together again."

Shao whimpered. Jie held out his hand and Shao licked it briefly then trotted down the dirt path that connected all the bungalows, toward the prairie.

At the edge of the prairie, Shao took off at a run. He galloped freely, relishing the whoosh of cool dry night air passing through his fur. The scenery around him blurred with his speed, the scents of the night filled his nostrils.

He ran fast and far, not slowing down until nothing surrounded him but the waving grasses and the sky overhead. A breeze passed over him and he caught a strange whiff of something. His hackles rose and he slowed to a trot, then a walk.

He halted, raising his snout to the air. His hackles immediately rose. The scent was feral, a dark musk that belonged only to a fellow predator.

He sniffed again as the scent of wild animal strengthened. Could it be? A fellow...*lang ren*.

A growl reverberated behind him. Then at his left side. Then at his right. The three sounds hummed around him at once. He backed up, away from the sounds.

And found himself faced with three angry, vicious looking *lang ren*.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

A howl reverberated through the quiet night air.

Then another.

And another.

Jie stiffened and sat up. His sudden movement displaced Meg where she'd been lying back against him in his arms.

Icy prickles skittered up Jie's arms and through his chest...the familiar warning sign of trouble.

"Jie?"

Jie sprang up and went to the window. He pushed aside the blind and studied the dark land in the direction of the prairie. Nothing.

Another unearthly howl reverberated through the air. Not Shao's.

"Shit." He snatched up his t-shirt and shrugged into it.

"Jie, where are you going?" Meg's voice was nearly shrill and her eyes were wide, they way they looked when she was frightened.

"I'm going to check on Shao."

"I'm going with you." She reached for her clothes and threw them on.

He whirled around and grasped her shoulders. "No. Absolutely not."

"But —"

"Meg, stay here with Li. Look after him."

"Jie, I want to make sure —"

A surge of raw adrenaline shot through him. "Meg, as your husband I forbid you." Not that they were married. Yet.

He saw his words hit their mark. Slowly she nodded.

He released her, threw on the rest of his clothes and headed for the door.

She followed him out into the tiny living room. "Jie."

Something in her voice made him turn.

She was staring at him. "If I think you're in danger, I won't continue to obey."

"Nor will I, son." Li's voice sounded close behind Jie.

He turned again and looked at his godfather. Of course, Master Li was well familiar with the howl of a *lang ren*.

"We won't act foolishly, Jie," his godfather said softly.

Jie sighed. "All right, *sifu*."

Jie went through the small hut and out the door. Night had nearly fallen but a touch of light in the sky showed him his way. He took off at a full run and was halfway down to the prairie when another howl rang through the twilight air, this one from the direction of town.

The howl continued and Jie followed the sound, his heart pumping. The animal's cries were ones he was all too familiar with. Only a *lang ren* produced unearthly sounds like these.

The sound persisted, leading Jie into the Tibetan side of town, into the high walled maze of stone alleys where most of the Tibetans in Xiahe resided.

Reaching a quiet uninhabited area a short distance from the dilapidated brick apartments, Jie turned the corner and froze. His heart pumped icy hot blood to every nerve ending in his skin. He stared.

A tall brawny man stood there...the spirit...or hallucination...of the one he'd killed in their death match. He laughed, a deep, cruel sound. "You look as if you've seen a ghost." He narrowed his eyes, lip curling in a snarl. Already, the change was evident in the glow of his eyes and darkening of his otherwise pale skin. "Don't worry, *bodark*," he muttered, his voice already deepening, sounding like a growl. "I'm real. I'm no dream. You murdered my brother." He growled. The sound grew more feral with the transformation of human speech to beastly grunt. The *lang ren* tore at his clothing as he changed. His snout elongated and light-colored fur sprouted from his skin.

Jie wanted to run. He couldn't change and fight this beast with equal strength but knew he had a better chance standing his ground than fleeing.

Jie planned a possible fight strategy while his opponent slipped into the final stages of change. Then Jie was faced with a huge, wolfen beast, identical to the one he'd fought back in Boston.

Jie's heart pounded, adrenaline coursed through him. He backed up, one step for each step the changing *lang ren* took toward him. He watched the man finish the change into beast and prepared inwardly to fight for his life. Thank God Meg and Shao weren't here. He didn't want Meg to be here alone if Shao tried to defend him and got killed.

Jie's hands curled into fists, his muscles tense, his body ready to fight. The *lang ren* had nearly completed his change and now stood on all fours, his body covered with silvery yellow fur.

The glowing eyes simmered with anger and blood lust. The creature's lip curled up, revealing sharp incisors. A menacing growl vibrated from its throat.

Jie became still. His years of training kicked in and he sank naturally into an on guard stance.

The wolf threw back his head and let out an eerie howl.

Shit. Jie's mind flashed to Meg and Shao. Where was Shao? He'd heard more than one creature howling earlier, none of whom had been Shao. A chill shivered up his spine. Dear God, what if they'd... No. Impossible. Even at half strength, Shao would fight to the death if he thought Meg was in danger.

Meg. He prayed she didn't come and try to find either of them.

The wolf leaped. Jie kicked with all the force of his concentration and power. His shoe landed in the *lang ren's* side.

The beast yelped and skittered back several feet.

Jie turned, bounded several steps, jumped and deflected off the stone wall, propelling himself toward the animal with both his feet.

The animal leaped again, met Jie in mid-air. Their bodies collided.

Jie grunted on impact. They hit the hard ground, Jie on top.

In a blind rage, Jie went for the wolf's throat. He grabbed hold but the wolf's fur was too thick and Jie couldn't reach the soft part that would cut off the creature's air. Sharp teeth sank into his forearm.

Pain ripped through Jie and he yelled.

In the waning light Jie saw a rock on the ground. Letting go with one hand he reached for it and brought it down on the creature's head.

The wolf yelped and released him. Jie rolled away, kicked out and flipped up to his feet. His arm bled freely and the pain was blinding but survival made him whirl around in time to dodge another attack.

The wolf hit the wall, yelped and backed up. He halted a few feet from Jie and stood, watching him again, growling.

A single trickle of blood marked the silvery yellow fur.

Jie stared at him.

The wolf barked. Then barked again.

This time, Jie heard the command in the sound. The creature was ordering him to change.

Pain throbbed in Jie's arm. He breathed heavily and pressed the palm of his hand over the bite wound. "I can't change," he said between breaths. "I'm no longer a *lang ren*."

The wolf narrowed its glowing eyes. The look accused Jie of lying, of procrastinating. It barked again and growled, the sound a clear challenge.

Man and beast stared each other down.

The wolf lunged. Jie dodged, turned and kicked the creature in the ribs again. The force of his kick propelled him against the wall, trapping him. The wolf whirled around and leaped, tackling Jie. Man and beast tumbled, locked together, to the ground.

Beast on top.

Jie punched and bit and struggled but the wolf had him at a disadvantage. In the heat of his struggle, Jie knew that it was a miracle he'd fought the beast's overwhelming strength for this long.

A canine claw ripped down Jie's front, tearing shirt and flesh. A second claw and then a third raked over his body, wounding him deeply. Jie held the creature's throat, straining to keep him off but the deep lacerations rapidly drained his strength.

The wolf pushed against his hands. The large jaws closed around his neck, sinking in. Razor-sharp canines punctured his flesh, cut off his air. Pain blinded him. Then it faded. He felt his blood flowing and the world grew dimmer.

"Jie!"

Meg. Jie heard her faintly. He closed his eyes against another rush of pain. It throbbed and then passed again. He saw only blackness. His hands slipped from the wolf's fur. Meg's screams and cries faded...

Shao's blood coursed like liquid fire through his veins. In spite of the fight he'd just had with three *lang ren* moments before, he was ready to kill a fourth. The white wolf crouched on top of Jie, its fur streaked with scarlet. Jie's blood.

His own blood.

Meg's screams echoed in his ears. Her anguished sound fueled his rage.

Shao advanced several steps and growled a warning.

The pale beast's head snapped up and glowing eyes fixed on him. He lifted himself off Jie's body.

Meg screamed. She grabbed a plank of wood from a trash heap and swung in furious strokes at the giant enemy wolf. "Get away from him, you bastard!" She swung, cursing and threatening each time. She advanced close enough to hit it but the creature backed up and growled at her, nothing else.

"Leave us alone you filthy, putrid, bastard!" Tears streamed down Meg's face and the board whirled in the air from the force of her swings but the creature managed to duck each time.

Shao knew why the white wolf didn't attack Meg. He wasn't going to kill the woman he planned to claim for his own.

Hot rage surged through Shao. He advanced, placed himself between the wolf and Meg, then leaped at it, jaws open. Shao's body slammed into his opponent's, sending them both rolling on the hard ground. In a blind rage, Shao sank his incisors straight into the white wolf's jugular.

Bearing down with all his strength, he pushed, fighting for a stronghold. Shao wrapped his front legs around his opponent, anchored himself while he clamped down with his jaws. The white wolf struggled against him, yelping, but Shao held on, blind rage pulsing through every inch of his body. He rolled several more times before he realized the *lang ren* no longer struggled.

Shao stopped, keeping his fangs sunk in, waiting. The *lang ren* didn't move.

Shao released him and maneuvered his body out of its stranglehold. The other beast lay still. Shao threw back his head and howled. His own sound reverberated through the air. He howled again, to mark the night with his triumph.

His unearthly victor's call faded. Only then did Shao lower his head and stand, panting, until he'd caught his breath. The sound of Meg's tears reached him, making him turn.

Meg crouched next to Jie, cradling his head in her lap. Blood smeared the front of her white shirt and she'd pulled off her jacket, using it to apply pressure to Jie's wounds. She was sobbing, her eyes swollen. "Shao, he's...dying."

Shao trotted over to her and licked her face. The salt of her tears rolled on his tongue. Sweet, beautiful Meg. She'd been so good to him, so loving. There was only one way to return such love.

He looked at Jie. Blood covered Jie's face, his breath, barely audible, rasped and labored.

Shao whined and licked off the blood, laving Jie's cheeks and neck clean. He lay down beside Jie mournfully while he changed back to human form.

Meg was still crying. "Shao, we have to save him." Her sweet voice was thick with tears and grief. "Oh God!"

Shao pushed and strained, morphing back to human as quickly as he could. No doctor could save Jie now. He was more than half dead.

As soon as Shao was human again, he sat up and lightly grasped Meg's wrists. He lifted her hands from Jie's torso and gently urged her back.

He looked down at Jie, smoothed a hand over the dying man's forehead. Silently, Shao said goodbye to Meg, then leaned over Jie.

Jie's eyes were closed and didn't open even when Shao's face was close enough that his breath passed over Jie's skin. Jie's lips were slightly parted and his breathing was frighteningly shallow, a bare whisper of movement.

Shao closed his eyes and pressed his lips to Jie's. Shao imagined his life force as vapors passing from deep inside him to Jie. He funneled the complete power of his mind and body toward one purpose.

Shao's mind and body grew still and he could hear his own heart pump in his chest. He continued to breathe into Jie's mouth. The sound of Jie's heartbeat strengthened to beat in syncopation with his. Shao passed several more gentle breaths into Jie's mouth, something he could never have done in his weakened state, when he'd first met Jie and Meg back in the police station. Jie had hated him too much but Jie had grown to love and accept him with Meg's help.

The distance between the rhythms of their two heartbeats closed. In moments, the sounds blended into one steady, strong beat.

Meg stared. Tears flowed down her cheeks.

Shao was fading before her eyes.

Jie's body jerked underneath Shao. His chest rose and fell with deeper breaths, stronger breaths.

Meg gasped. Could it be? She restrained herself from grasping Shao's hand. His outline was no more distinct now than mist.

And then he was gone.

Jie gasped. He released a spate of coughs and rolled over, choking and gasping. His back heaved as if he'd been deprived of oxygen and had just been given air.

"Jie!" Meg leaned over and rubbed his back. His t-shirt was torn and bloodstained but he appeared strong.

Someone appeared in the alley. Meg jerked her gaze up. "Who's there?" she demanded.

"It's all right, Meg. It's me, Jie's godfather."

She breathed a sigh of relief at the old man's voice.

Master Li walked over to her and knelt down. He slipped gentle hands under Jie's back and held Jie.

The elderly man's touch seemed to restore Jie. Jie's coughing fit passed and he calmed enough for Meg and Li to help him sit up. With Li's hands on Jie's upper back, Meg shifted behind Jie and Li helped her lower Jie against her upper body for support.

Hot tears stung her eyes and slipped down her cheeks in a steady stream. She squeezed him as hard as she dared. Her hand lay lightly on his chest. Under his ripped shirt, she felt nothing but smooth, undamaged skin. Dried blood crusted his chest but his wounds had healed completely.

Jie touched her arm. "Meg." His voice was hoarse.

"I'm here, Jie." She leaned over and stroked his cheek. "I'm here. So is Master Li. We're looking after you."

He blinked and stared up her. His dark eyes appeared unfocused. "Where... Where's Shao?"

She didn't answer. A pang of grief gripped her, made her unable to speak.

Jie looked at his godfather. "*Sifu*," he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

In the dim light of the alleyway lamp, the old man's face radiated relief and concern. He reached out and patted Jie's cheek. "You're alive, son. That's all that matters."

Jie sighed and sagged in Meg's arms. He leaned back and looked at her. "Meg." His voice was a hoarse whisper. But it was strong. Alive.

She leaned over and kissed his lips softly.

He returned her kiss with gentle warmth. The feeling of love radiated through their kiss. He pulled back and gazed up at her, his eyes more focused, his expression showing he'd healed. "I'm here, Meg. It's all right."

She nodded. Tears blurred her vision, made his handsome face unclear under the light from a nearby streetlamp. "I know. Shao...he saved you."

Jie's eyes widened. "Where is he?"

Meg looked at him. She lifted her hand and placed it flat on one side of Jie's healed chest. "He went home."

## **Epilogue**

*One month later...*

Jie threw his head back and howled. A sense of raw power surged through his wolfen body, down each of his four legs to his claws. He listened to his own sound echo in the air until it died, blending with the wind through the prairie grasses.

He was alive, whole, thanks to Shao, the part of him he'd once hated and rejected but who'd saved him, given him the chance of more life with Meg.

Jie took off at a run. The wind sifted through his fur, enhancing the wild sense of freedom. The dry cool air of the night smelled of wildflowers and earth. But the only scent he wanted filling him was Meg, her skin and hair, the musk of her sex. He wanted to taste her skin, her breasts, her moist cave. As soon as he got back to the hut and changed back, he wanted to feel her in his arms, to bury his dragon deep inside her.

Tomorrow, they would make the journey to America with his godfather, back to Chinatown, to Chen's Market and to Meg's unusual but sweet and loving family.

First, tonight, the sweet welcome of Meg's love. The love of his mate.

Jie ran faster. His powerful wolfen muscles shifted and bunched as he galloped. The lights shone from his godfather's cottage, illuminating Jie's path.

He was going home.

## **About the Author**

Award-winning, multi-published author of erotic romance, Sedonia Guillone spends her days writing deliciously naughty romances—when she's not cuddling with the man she loves or watching kung fu and samurai films and eating chocolate.

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