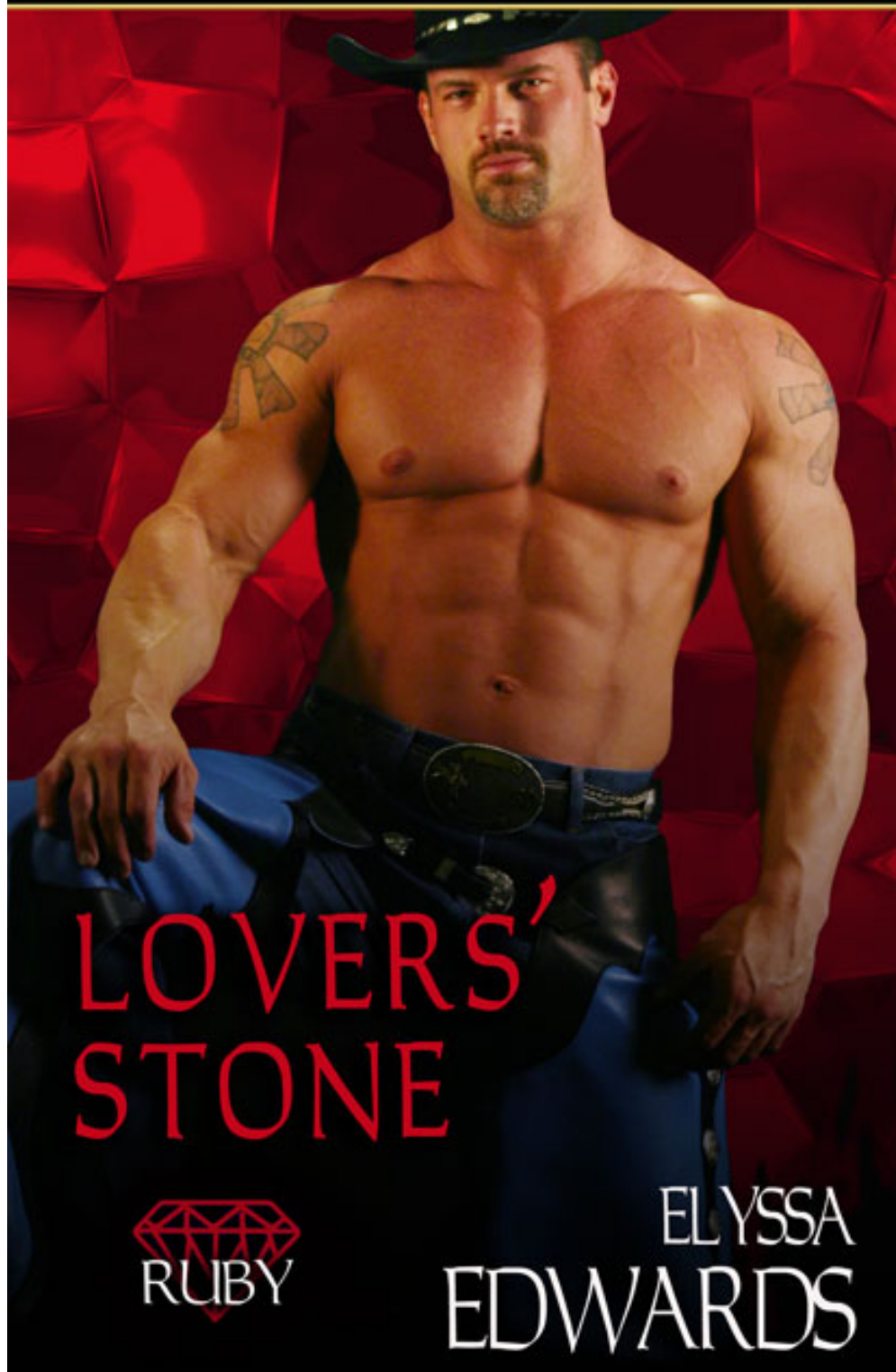


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



# LOVERS' STONE



ELYSSA  
EDWARDS

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Lovers' Stone

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# *LOVERS' STONE*

Elyssa Edwards

## *Acknowledgements*

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## **Chapter One**

"Thanks Luke," the young man looked at him seriously. "I appreciate this."

"We're family," the tall dark-haired man answered with equal sobriety. "Not many in our clan would believe it, Rand but that does mean something to me." The dark brown eyes frowned as they examined the light blue ones before him. "Our fathers were brothers. I have to say this or I'd not be doing my duty here. Are you sure you want to do this? Are you really ready to present Bethany with a mating stone?"

The younger man smiled at him. "Yes Luke, I'm ready. Besides there's always a chance I won't find my stone. There's still a chance to change my mind after I find it. Besides, we may be Weres but we're not wolves. We're bears. We don't mate for life. If Bethany and I find out we've made a mistake, we can simply destroy the stone and move on."

Luke suppressed the urge to slap the kid in front of him. "Rand, if you're walking into a mating already planning how to get out then you're not ready. Promise me you'll really think about this before you do it. Let's go and come back in a week, in a month."

The handsome face of the young man frowned at him. "It's now, Luke. I'm ready now and you promised Father that since I have no brothers you'd come with me, watch my back. The hunters are getting bolder. No one thinks they know about this place but what if they do?"

"Then I'll kick their asses while you find your mating stone," Luke sighed. "Go on in but don't ask me to wish you luck." The kid smiles too easily, Luke thought. He should be a hell of a lot more nervous.

"If I don't find it, then it's not meant to be, right?" Rand shrugged, turned and headed down one of the tunnels to the left.

“Good luck,” Luke whispered, “whatever that means.” He moved over to a smooth, worn ledge on one side of the small cave and sat down. The gray walls domed over his head. It was dark and the only light was the flashlight he held in his hands. Farther inside, down the corridors, the way was lit by the glow of torches. Torches that would light and extinguish as a man walked past them. Or at least that was what he’d been told happened. Luke had come to this place only once before with his friend Wade. Wade had come seeking his own mating stone. One he never had a chance to use because a group of hunters cornered him alone the next night and killed him. They had pumped him so full of silver nitrate almost nothing was left of him but the blood red stone that was still in the pocket of his jacket. Either the hunters hadn’t recognized the large garnet as having any value or they hadn’t even bothered to check.

Only the male seeking his mating stone entered the lower chambers. There were thirteen that branched off this main room. Down each were the precious and semiprecious stones that were capable of binding the spirit of a male Were to his mate’s spirit. Rand wouldn’t need him while he searched, not even for protection. No one who wasn’t of their clan could enter this cave. The door had been enchanted. It was hidden from view and none who did not bear the blood of their people could enter even if they did manage to find it. Luke leaned back against the wall. The stone was uncomfortable. He sat up and peered into the darkness into which his cousin had disappeared. It sounded so simple. Go into the correct cave, find the mating stone and come out. It had taken Wade ten hours to find the right damned stone. *Screw it*, he thought and snatched a small pillow from midair before stretching out on the bench to wait. Truth be told he hoped Rand took his time. He’d been dragged from his bed at an ungodly early hour the last couple of days and was exhausted. What the hell had possessed him to volunteer to look after his nephews while his brother, Mark and his mate got away for a weekend? When he figured out what weakness had prompted it, he was damned well going to rip it out and kill it.

*How hard can it be to keep reins on two boys? They’ve got a nanny.* The famous last words of a fool. He’d actually volunteered mostly to see the shock on his brother’s face

but also to test out the limits of the forgive and forget scenario his sister-in-law, Sarah, had forced on the two of them. Sweet Sarah. The night Mark had sworn the oath as *Amar*, leader of their people, Sarah, the new *Amari*, had kissed his cheek and called him brother despite over a century of animosity and unfriendly competition between the twins. She'd reached past the anger and hate inside him and made him want to be... Gods, he couldn't even say it...good.

Yeah, there was one person in the world who could touch anything inside Luke and it was Sarah. Okay, more than one. The boys, Nicky and Jake, gave him one hell of a warm feeling inside. He fucking hated it but they did. And he and Mark were under strict orders to provide a good example of fraternal bonding for the two.

And for Sarah's sake he would try. The human woman had changed everything when she'd mated his brother. She'd brought gentleness and tenderness into their lives that they hadn't known before. And despite what others may mumble quietly when he and Mark could not hear, her compassion only seemed to make them stronger. He never would have believed Mark would have become the leader he'd shown himself to be the last two years. And he knew that part of what made the *Amar* impressive was the whispers of the *Amari* in his ear.

Luke closed his eyes. He'd almost dozed off when he heard a voice calling. He sat up slowly. A glowing gold mist covered the floor of the cave and it was coming from the central passage. He rose and walked slowly to the archway and stopped. Each of the other twelve corridors led to rooms that held stones. A male picked the path whose stones corresponded to the birth stone of the female he hoped to mate with. Only one stone in the tens of thousands that filled this mountain would support the mating of a particular couple. Supposedly if the mating was not meant to be, he would not find the stone. Wade had searched through hundreds of gems to find the right one. He'd told Luke it had sung to him the minute he touched it. Wade said it had glowed and the face of his future mate had appeared in its depths. More, it had vibrated in such a way that

he'd become instantly aroused and his need to join with his mate had burned like a fire in his body.

But this center corridor, this thirteenth passage was one that was never used. It could not be entered except by those who were called. And to Luke's knowledge no one had been called down this path in so long what lay at its end had become legend. An oasis of lovers' stones the lore said. A collection of stones from each of the caves but they were more than just simple mating stones. These stones were for those Weres who were tied to another by destiny. The two bound by a lovers' stone were destined for more than mating bliss. Theirs was to be a great lifelong love. To Luke it sounded like more than legend. It sounded like bullshit.

The mist swirled around him and Luke's legs carried him of their own volition through the arch and down the narrow tunnel. There were no torches here, only the glow of the golden fog lit his way. He heard the voice call again. "Where are you? I can't see you." It was a woman's voice.

He heard nothing but the voice. Not even his inexplicably bare feet made a sound on the stone floor. He took turn after turn following the light that pulled him along. Abruptly the fog rose to the ceiling just in front of him taking the shape of a doorway through which he could not see. He heard her calling again. She was looking for someone. She was looking for him. The realization lifted something inside him. He stepped through a large bank of the golden mist and found himself in a vaulted chamber. In the center of the room was a shimmering pool surrounded by large low pallets filled with cushions and pillows. Directly across from him an identical doorway had formed. Before it, watching him with large frightened eyes was a woman. Her long black hair was loose and flowed down her back. The blue eyes glowed so brightly for a moment he considered that she might be a succubus but dismissed the thought. No creature could have gained entrance here except those who were like him. Only another Were could have entered the cave, let alone this most sacred place. Or that was what they'd always been told.



The woman was dressed in a long, red satin nightgown with thin straps that barely contained the full breasts that threatened to overflow the bodice. Her hips curved in a way that made a man long to run his hands over them, to hold tightly to them as he thrust inside her. The pull she seemed to be exerting over him was stronger than any desire he'd ever felt. Screw mating stones, just looking at this woman was making him hard.

\* \* \* \* \*

The man who stepped through the shimmering golden door was heart-stopping. His shoulder length dark brown hair and equally dark eyes gave the finely chiseled face a brooding, sexy look that just screamed out, "Baby, I'm exactly what your lonely little body has been waiting for." Every time she'd had this dream, followed the mist from her own bed, down the hall and into this room, she had found herself alone in this place that looked like something from Westerners' fantasies about the decadence of a sheik's harem. She'd known he was there, out of sight, out of reach but he had never appeared until now. He was finally here and God was he worth waiting for. The sight of him sent a rush of desire through her until it swirled in the pit of her stomach.

She knew his name. She'd known it the moment she looked into his eyes. "Lucas?" she whispered softly. A smile so bright it nearly blinded her and so seductive she felt her body scream out its readiness for him, stretched his full lips across perfect white teeth. Well, almost perfect. His incisors were a bit longer and sharper than the norm. *Oh yes*, a voice in her cried out, *I'm going to have one of those dreams where the heroine is ravaged by the sexy vampire*. Just like in the novels by her favorite author, she was going to get down and dirty with vamp-boy.

"Annie," his voice was a rich baritone that sent a shiver down her spine. Annie. No one had called her that in almost ten years, not since her mother had died. Her name was Anna. She hated being called Annie. Correction. She hated it when anyone else called her that but when he said it her body jolted as if he'd touched her.

He crossed the room quickly and she found herself in his arms, his hands wrapped around her. The dark eyes held hers as he lowered his head. When their lips met it was as if a blast of pure want shot through her body. Her nipples hardened and she whimpered softly. She brought her hands up to wrap around his neck as his tongue pressed its way into her mouth. His long hair, where it brushed the backs of her hands, felt so soft. Tangling her fingers in it she found it thicker and lusher than any hair she'd ever known. It was almost like sinking her hands into the softest of fur.

His hands were strong and demanding as they moved down her back to cup over her ass. He pulled her against him and she was momentarily shocked at how blatant his arousal was. That he was a truly gifted man was obvious even through his clothes. His fingers kneaded the curves of her ass as if he couldn't quite believe what he was feeling before one broke away and moved up to her breast. As strong and almost harsh as his grip on her buttocks had been, the hand that closed over the satin covered breast was gentle. It massaged her making her nipples even harder, making her breasts swell and ache.

He broke the kiss long enough to lift her into his arms. He carried her to the soft bank of cushions near the small reservoir of water in the middle of the room. The pool was surrounded by gemstones in all colors that seemed to glow from within adding a kaleidoscope effect to the walls and ceiling. He knelt next to her and she reached up, placing her hands on his chest, pushing him back slightly. The expression that washed over his face blended confusion, impatience and more than a bit of hurt. "I want to know something." She forced the words out through her rapid breathing.

"Anything, my darling," he moved closer to her again and she didn't stop him when he brushed his lips against her neck.

She moaned softly at the feel of the kiss against the sensitive skin and blurted out her question before she could chicken out. "Are you a vampire?"

He froze for a moment and lifted his head. One eyebrow was raised and an amused smirk was growing on his lips. "Vampire?" He laughed at her softly but she didn't feel

the pained rejection she would have expected. The laugh was sweet not mocking. "No, Annie. I'm not one of the undead. I'm very much alive. Would you like me to prove it to you?" There was a wicked glint in his eyes. "Vampire? No my sweet, I'm no blood-sucker."

He kissed her again and her head swam. Okay, scratch the vamp-boy fantasy. He wasn't a vampire but this was as sure as hell one amazing dream anyway. He trailed his kiss down her shoulder as he pushed the strap of her gown down. She slid her arms free and tugged at the t-shirt he wore. He helped her pull it over his head. *Holy hell*, she thought as she looked at his bare torso. Forget vampires. Who needs vampires when she has a sex god leaning over her looking as if he can't wait to show her pleasures she didn't know existed.

She watched his eyes as he slid down her body. He pulled the bodice of the gown as he went and bared her breasts, her stomach and the soft triangle of hair at the top of her thighs then on down until he slid it completely off. The look in his eyes as he raked his gaze over her body made something in her begin to burn. No man had ever looked at her like this. She didn't think of herself as beautiful. She was average, nothing special. But the look in her dark angel's eyes as he examined every curve made her feel sexy. It made her feel brazen and bold.

Anna pushed herself up onto her knees. She reached for him and slid her hands over the skin of his chest following the touch of her fingers with the touch of her lips. She explored and traced the lines of his pectorals and abs pushing him back. His hands toyed with her breasts as she tasted his skin, moving lower. He didn't try to stop her, didn't even pause in the delight he was spreading through her as she opened his jeans and slid them down his hips. Commando. Fine by her, that was one less layer to remove. As soon as she'd freed him from the denim confines she realized her imagination had not begun to do him justice. She let him kick away the jeans and crawled back up to wrap her hand around the thick, hard cock that stood begging for her attention.

The sound he made was low in his throat and so primitive it touched a place inside Anna she didn't know existed. Lovers in the past had asked, begged and even threatened for what her mind now desperately wanted. In the past she'd sometimes given in, but now the feel of him in her mouth was something *she* wanted. She leaned down and drew her tongue up the length of him, from the broad thick base to the smooth rounded head. He moaned her name and the sound of it made the taste of him even sweeter.

"Turn for me, beautiful," his hands were on her hips and he was pulling her toward his head. She twisted around, keeping her lips around him and her hand caressing him. He guided her until she was straddling his face. His tongue touched first the soft inner thigh and she jerked at the feel. He blew a soft breath over her wetness before pulling her down to his mouth and tasting her.

The feel of his hardness sliding against her tongue as his ran long searching strokes through the folds of her wet skin made tremors shoot through her. The man had one hell of a talented tongue. Slowly he fucked her with that tongue, pushing it into her entrance. She moaned as she sucked at his cock, loving how it filled her mouth, loving how he didn't try to thrust up deeper than she was taking him. His tongue moved from her opening to torment her clit. Rapid hard flicks against the tender nodule made her legs tremble. Her groans of pleasure vibrating against his cock were causing him to answer her with deep grunts that assaulted her clitoris as delightfully as his tongue.

As if by a signal they pulled away from the oral pleasures in unison and each sought the others lips, the taste of their passion mingling on their tongues. He eased her onto her back, never ceasing the relentless plundering of her mouth. His knee urged her legs apart and she opened for him willingly. As he lay between her thighs she brought her legs up, wrapping them around him. The pressure of his erection pressed against her swollen lower lips and made her want to scream for him to be inside her. As if he heard her, never breaking the probing beauty of their kiss, he pressed into her.

He filled her completely. She cried out into his mouth. It was then he broke the kiss. Holding himself still inside her he reached down and teased her nipple. Pinching it gently, tugging on it softly. As he tormented her breasts he started to move slowly. Long, deep thrusts that took him to the limit within her body and then out again withdrawing almost totally from her wetness. She could see the fierce concentration in his face as he fought for control. His strokes increased in speed and power. Anna closed her eyes and arched her body to hurry his pace. Her head began to twist and the hands that had been moving over his chest flung out and grabbed at something, anything. Her right hand twisted in the fabric covering the pallet but her left hand struck something hard and wet.

She was only vaguely aware she must have touched the small pool but as he began to drive into her harder, his groans becoming more erotic, more desperate in the pleasure he was finding in her body, she closed her hand around the hard, uneven protrusion on the edge of the pond. The reaction was immediate. Something charged through her body causing her to scream with pleasure. Each motion, each move of his cock inside her seemed a thousand times more stimulating, more tantalizing. Her hands clenched harder. She heard and felt the cloth in her right hand rip. She felt the piece of the pool in her left hand start to give. When he reached between them and stroked her clitoris something erupted inside her more powerful than any adrenaline burst she'd ever felt.

The lip of the pool to which she clung broke free. Her body curled in on itself, her legs wrapping tighter around him. She pressed her hand to his chest, unmindful of the hot glassy object she held clutched in her fist. He jerked violently as if the same power was suddenly running through him and she heard him cry out. He was moaning her name and pounding away at her flesh. Nothing existed for her in that moment, nothing but the tidal wave of sexual pleasure that soared through her. Then with her hand frozen in a fist around the stone, the world exploded and both of their screams rang out loudly, bouncing off the high ceiling. The stone slipped from her fingers as her body

went limp in the wake of the orgasm. Anna clung to him and heard him murmur something that sounded like, “I love you,” just as the world went black.

\* \* \* \* \*

Luke could hear someone calling his name. Rand must have finished. He opened his eyes slowly and they focused on a large vaulted ceiling painted with gold and silver celestial patterns. He was instantly awake. He wasn’t in the outer room. He wasn’t sleeping on the bench. He remembered in a flash of panic. He was in the inner chamber lying on a soft pallet of cushions. The forbidden inner chamber. He lay there listening to Rand’s voice but not hearing it. Because beyond the inconvenience of being in a chamber that was supposed to be off limits, beyond the fact that he was lying there naked was the fact that he could feel something cool and hard clenched in his left hand.

Luke sat up slowly and lifted his hand. He opened his palm. In the center lay a rough cut, bright red stone. It glowed and vibrated in his hand. The pulse that moved through him made his body stir. He heard a voice in the back of his mind whisper his name. Lifting the roughly heart-shaped gem he looked into it and saw a raven-haired siren with bright blue eyes gazing back at him.

“Oh shit,” Luke closed his eyes. This was not happening. This could not happen. That stone. He’d not come here seeking it but there was no mistaking it. He felt her somewhere in the back of his mind, he felt her body against him though she wasn’t there. He smelled her on his skin. The woman had been real and in his hand lay the proof of it. In his hand lay his mating stone.

Him? The man his own brother referred to as Lucas “screw the whole world and everyone in it” Ursine? And that was when he wasn’t pissed at him. But how? To whom? He had to see the Oracle. The Oracle would know. He looked at the stone again. A ruby? He searched his mind for an explanation. Why was he holding a July stone? Bears didn’t give birth in July. As Weres—shapeshifters whose bodies were tied to the animal whose spirit they shared, in their case the bear—they too had “seasons”. Late

fall and winter were the birthing months. Spring and early summer the months of conception.

This meant only one thing. She wasn't one of his people. There were few species in this world with whom a Were could mate. They could mate with the angelus, winged creatures humans often mistook for divine beings. Though rare, they could also join to the fey, a varied group of little creatures that humans called faeries or gnomes. And humans. And since the woman who had just given him the most intense orgasm of his life didn't have wings and she had full, lush, mouthwatering curves it could mean only one thing. His destined mate was a human.

Luke glared angrily at the red stone. "Just my fucking luck."

## Chapter Two

"Jack you can't be serious," Anna sighed. She smoothed a hand over her black hair, pressing back the strands that had escaped the tail. "Hasn't this family suffered enough?"

"I don't happen to see taking my place as a hunter, being one of hundreds of generations of this family dedicated to protecting the uninitiated among us from the monsters out there as adding to anyone's suffering. We are why they can sleep nights. We are what chase away the boogeyman." His hazel eyes flashed angrily.

"You're not a *see'er*, Jack. You can't tell the monsters from the paperboy," she huffed.

"No," his lips were compressed into an angry line. "You're the *see'er* in this family, Anna. But the fates didn't exactly leave you prepared to take up the duty we owe to humanity."

"Do you hear yourself? Good gods, Jack you sound like..." she stopped herself before she said it.

"Like Dad," he finished standing abruptly. "Yeah, I do Anna and I'm not sure when that became a bad thing around here."

"How about when he was sentenced to life in prison because he killed the wrong man? He killed a *man*, Jack. Did you learn anything from that? Didn't it show you how stupid an idea it is for someone who's not a *see'er*, who can't see the monster's true form, to undertake this..." Her breath fled from her and she began to cough. The hacking came from deep in her lungs and lasted for almost a full minute. Her face was a strangled shade of purple by the time her brother pushed the glass of water into her hands and she'd stopped coughing enough to sip from it. He pulled the glass away and handed her an inhaler.



"Easy Anna," his voice was soothing now. His dark brows were furrowed deeply as he stroked the side of her face. "I shouldn't have told you. I shouldn't have come here. It's my fault. I've gotten you all worked up."

"Don't...you dare...go...all big...brother...on me," she rasped out. She put the plastic mouthpiece between her lips and tried to breathe deeply as she compressed the top. The bitter tasting medication was sucked into her lungs. After a pause during which he pushed the water glass back into her grip and patted her knee, she spoke again, "Don't do it, Jack."

"The hunters are our family, Anna. I trust them. Someone has to stop the werewolves, the demons and the other dark ones from preying on the defenseless. I'm not a *see'er*, true but I won't be picking the targets. I'll be matched with a *see'er* for patrols."

"Like the genius they paired with Dad?" she couldn't stop herself. He had to see reason. "He told Dad that guy was a Were. Dad killed him only to find out he was an insurance salesman with three kids."

Jack stood up and frowned down at her. "I've made my decision, Anna. You can't step into Dad's place, I can."

"Great, so it'll be my fault," she closed her eyes. "Because I have the bad gene. Because I developed the sickness, my brother becomes a killer. Nice."

He stroked her hair like he used to do when she was small and would climb into his bed during thunderstorms. Lying curled to him, a very grown-up five years older than her, he'd soothe them both back to sleep with a song, a story or the tender brush of his hand on her hair. "Get some rest, Sis." He kissed the top of her head. "Do you want me to help you lie down?"

She shook her head. She was exhausted and it wasn't even noon. "I can do it."

Jack nodded, squeezed her shoulder and left.

She kept her eyes down on the table until she heard the door close. Damn it. What was he thinking? At thirty-two he was too old to decide to play cowboy. Wasn't he?

Anna pulled back on the small black lever in her left hand and the soft whir of a motor could be heard. The wheelchair reversed, taking her away from the table where she and Jack had been having coffee. Pushing the lever forward she maneuvered the electric wheelchair into her bedroom. Jack was right about only one thing. She needed to rest.

\* \* \* \* \*

Luke rubbed his fingers over the stone in his jacket pocket. He watched the reactions of the four faces as he finished his story. No surprises. Sarah looked thoughtful and a bit pensive. Tarris looked sadly amused. The Oracle's face was blank. And Mark looked pissed.

"You entered the thirteenth chamber?" he said it again for the third time.

"Dear, I think we've established that," Sarah said quietly and laid her hand on his.

"It's forbidden to enter the thirteenth chamber," the *Amar* glared at his brother.

"Not precisely," the Oracle spoke for the first time. The figure was old. So old it had lost all hint of gender. The head was bald, the face lined, the hands that folded in the robed lap were gnarled. The voice sat on the indefinable line between male and female. "It is forbidden to enter unless called. From what Lucas has described, I think we can safely determine he was called."

"So there's no crime here?" Sarah sighed and sat back. "He hasn't broken any rules." Being human she was struggling hard to adjust to the brutal rules of conduct, tradition and punishment the clan clung to. She'd only learned of the existence of the shapeshifting Weres two years ago when she'd fallen in love with the man destined to lead their clan. Luke had to give her credit, she was adapting admirably.

The Oracle smiled for the first time. "No child, our Lucas has done nothing to warrant punishment." The smile faded. "But there is a great deal here that I do not understand."

"Like why the chamber called Luke of all people," Mark muttered.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Luke protested before reminding himself he was actually getting off pretty lucky here. At least Mark wasn't doing something that would make him have to forget he wasn't just his pain in the ass big brother anymore and was actually *Amar*. Kicking Mark's ass would be satisfying. Kicking the *Amar's* ass could land him before tribunal. He shuddered slightly. That was not something he wanted.

*It called Luke because it was tired of waiting for him to come to it.* Tarris, an incubus and unable to speak as either human or Were except in the world of dreams, sent his thoughts into the heads of the others.

Mark rolled his eyes but the Oracle nodded. "According to legends when a male enters the cave he awakens a chamber, the chamber where his mating stone lies. The thirteenth chamber is said only to awaken to those with a special destiny. Those who have a soul mate that they have not yet found."

"A soul mate?" Sarah asked curiously. She was learning that even simple terms she might be familiar with in the human world held a different meaning for the Weres.

Luke answered. "This stone isn't just a mating stone, Sarah, it's a lovers' stone. Some of us mate in the normal way. There is no one true mate. Those who were born with soul mates, however, find that they cannot mate to anyone else. Only that one lover will ever light the stone for them. It is more than an exaggerated feeling of intimacy, it is a real and lasting connection to that one soul that will survive even death."

"But why Luke?" Mark insisted.

*Why Luke?* Tarris stood and looked down at the older twin. *Why you?*

Both brothers stiffened. Mark looked down and Luke stared at him, anger building. "You?"

Mark sighed. "Sometimes I hate telepaths. Yes, me. I entered to find my stone. I had searched all through the amethyst caves. I'd been there an entire day when I heard Sarah calling me. I followed her voice into the entrance and down to the thirteenth chamber. There I found our stone."

"And you didn't tell me?" Luke snapped. "If everyone had known Sarah was your soul mate they'd have known that she was the only one to whom you could mate.

"First of all, we weren't exactly buddies at the time, Luke. Secondly, I figured it wasn't a very good idea to give anyone any more impetus to try to kill Sarah to get at me."

The Oracle cleared its throat. The light gray eyes pierced through Luke as if they could look inside his mind, forcing him to set aside his anger at Mark. "You believe the woman called to the chamber was human?"

Mark shook his head. "Why on earth would the chamber call a human?"

"I'm starting to feel a little insulted," Sarah glared at her mate. "He's your brother, your twin. You found your soul mate to be a human. This is our lovers' stone around my neck, dear."

"The *Amari* is correct. Twins are often tied together whether they like it or not," a faint curl tickled the ancient one's lips.

*So now Luke just has to find this woman and convince her to mate with him.* Tarris' words in Luke's head carried a sorrowful tone. It went beyond sympathy to something more. *That may not be easy.*

"I don't think convincing is the problem. She didn't need a lot of convincing," Luke admitted with an arrogant grin. "Finding her will be the hard part."

No, Tarris was looking off over their heads at the two little boys toddling and crawling about in the garden under the watchful eye of their nurse. Sarah stood and walked over to stand beside him as he watched her sons at play. Her hand tucked in his arm. *I can find her easily. Her spirit clings to you and to your lovers' stone. Convincing her will be the hard part.* Though all heard his projection, he directed these last words to Luke.

"That part I can handle," Luke grinned.

"Luke," Sarah warned, "what if she doesn't realize it was anything more than a dream? We often do things in dreams that we would never allow ourselves to do in the

waking world and vice versa." She rested her cheek on Tarris' arm and Luke was puzzled by the sudden melancholy that had descended on this man who was closer to him than any mere friend could ever be. Tarris was more than friend.

"So it won't be easy. But if she's my soul mate, if the lovers' stone chose her for me, then I'll do what it takes." Luke stated firmly. "If not now, then I have a lifetime to do it. She's the woman I'm destined to love and she will love me. She just doesn't know it yet."

Tarris moved away from the windows and toward the door. *I'll be in my room when you're ready to begin searching.*

The Oracle excused himself and Luke turned his attention to his *Amar* and *Amari*. "What's wrong with Tarris?"

"That's for him to tell, if he chooses," Mark stopped Sarah from replying. "You should go to him. He'll help you find your mystery woman. He needs to feed, Luke."

Luke looked from one to the other, a bit confused. Tarris was an incubus, a creature whose very life depended upon its feeding on the sexual energies of others. Found orphaned by their father, he'd grown up with the two brothers. When he reached sexual maturity they'd happily been the source of nourishment for him. Both brothers had shared willing partners with him, allowing him to enhance the experience and to guide them, to a degree. This allowed him to feed. He'd been lover and friend to both. The heightened sexual appetite of the Weres had been enough to sustain him. He'd never known hunger and because of it had never crossed over to the dark life of an incubus. Luke knew, though no one ever spoke of it, that Sarah and Mark had shared their passions with him on the night Mark had introduced them.

"If Annie doesn't mind, I sure as hell don't." Luke stood and left the room. "And if she'd mind I can't see how the lovers' stone could have bound us together."

Tarris was sitting beside the fire as always. His kind craved heat and the Minnesota summers just didn't cut it. The air vents had been blocked in this room and the

temperature was roughly that of Miami Beach on the hottest day in August. Luke stripped off his shirt as soon as he entered and dropped into the opposite chair. Within seconds sweat started to shine on the broad muscled chest. This place was better than a sauna.

*You're ready?* Tarris asked without looking at him.

"Let's do this," Luke nodded and reached for Tarris' hand. The touch of the incubus wrapped around his brain and he was asleep, head leaned against the back of the chair before he drew his next breath.

\* \* \* \* \*

Anna was swimming. The Olympic-sized pool in the housing community's clubhouse was just perfect. She felt the cool water slide over her skin as she kicked and pulled, skimming through it in what was sure to be a record time. She hit the side, stopping the timer and smiled at the results. Her best yet. Pulling herself out of the pool she grabbed her towel and dried her arms and shoulders before pulling the cap from her hair. As she bent to dry her legs, an eerie feeling swept over her. A part of her woke up. She froze suddenly aware she was dreaming. She looked down at the pool. She'd not been able to swim as much as a lap in almost a year now. She was barely able to stand long enough to dress herself.

"Why couldn't I have stayed asleep," she muttered.

"You are mostly," the voice sent a wave of goose bumps across her flesh. "Only one part of you is awake. And I think you might want to be at least a little awake for this."

She smiled and turned toward the voice. He was back. She'd never forget that voice as long as she lived, dreaming or waking. The man who had been part of the most intense sex dream she'd ever had was back. Her sex god had returned to her. His dark eyes were shining as he watched her. His chest was bare and she could almost taste the golden skin that stretched across his pecs, almost feel the darker circles of flesh that marked his male nipples tickle her tongue. The cargo shorts rode low on his hips and

she could see the dip just below his hipbone. Strong legs were sprinkled with dark hair. Good God, even this man's feet were sexy. She realized in that moment she was wetter now than she had been while submerged in the pool.

Lucas. His name was Lucas she remembered as he walked to her. His hands reached for her and cupped her face. "Annie," he whispered softly before lowering his lips to hers. The kiss was just as delicious as she remembered. His tongue was bold and his arms slid around her pulling her close. He began to move his hands over her body, slipping them over the wet swimsuit that clung to her. He broke the kiss and held her for a moment, his hands resting now on her hips. He lowered his head to touch his forehead to hers. His eyes were closed and a smug little grin was curling his lips.

"I think we can do better than this," he lifted his head and jerked it in a gesture to the pool. "Tarris? What do you say?"

The scene melted around her until it seemed as if they had fallen onto a blank canvas awaiting an artist's brush. Suddenly the new vista burst forth around them. She was no longer standing in the clubhouse. Eyes wide, she surveyed the changes that had been wrought. The pool had been replaced by a small pond being fed by waterfall. The water was so clear she could see straight through to the sandy bottom. Several large rocks jutted out as if nature had placed them for diving boards and stairs. Trees formed a lush green canopy above them and brilliant flowers the like of which she'd never seen blazed in patches of explosive color.

"Lucas, it's beautiful," she breathed in astonishment. "But if this is my dream, how did you..."

"Luke, my dearest." He corrected her. "No one calls me Lucas unless I'm in deep trouble and I didn't do this." He moved closer to her, his chest against her back and placed his hands on her shoulders, his fingers brushing the skin and making her almost forget her question, almost forget everything but the need that was starting to build inside her. The sight and scent of him were enough to make her surrender any pretense of playing hard to get but his touch drove such foolishness from her mind. He lifted her

hair from her neck and pressed his lips to the column of fair, white flesh. His lips were warm, scorching hot as they moved from the lobe of her ear down to her shoulder. One arm stole around her waist and pulled her back against the hard wall of his body.

Her modest one-piece suit was gone and replaced by a bikini top she would never have had the nerve to wear. Her breasts spilled over its bright tropical print edges as if threatening to render it moot. Around her waist was a sarong over a pair of cute bottoms with the smallest bit of flounce. No way she'd have ever had the nerve to try this thing on in the store, let alone actually wear it. But the way Luke was kissing her, touching her, he didn't seem to notice this wasn't exactly the sort of suit a woman like her should be wearing.

"He did." The words bounced in her brain for a moment before she realized he was answering her question.

She opened her eyes and saw him. "Mother of all that's holy," she exclaimed softly. Standing in the shade of a tree on the opposite side of the pond was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen. If the man holding her was a sex god, what the hell did that make the blond man watching her with the most intense blue eyes she'd ever seen? His golden hair hung around him like the mane of a wild lion. His bare chest was smooth and broad, his torso tapering to narrow hips that were clothed only in a soft pair of what looked like buckskin pants. One hand was braced against a tree trunk and she could see the definition in the muscles of his arm, accentuated by the play of light through the leaves overhead.

Luke's chuckle sounded in her ear. "He is beautiful, isn't he?" His hands moved over her rib cage and stopped, splayed just under her breasts as if he'd halted just before cupping them. "He created this."

Anna's eyes widened. She looked hard at the blond man. The rational part of her mind started putting pieces together and she didn't like what she was seeing. She pulled away from Luke and looked at him sharply. Her *see'er's* vision worked in dreams for only one type of dark creature—only the incubus—but even for her they were



difficult to identify. She examined Luke's features. There was no shimmer or change in him. There was a small scar above one eye. Handsome and dead sexy yes but not perfect. The incubus would be perfect. "Tell him to step into the light."

Luke was frowning at her, confusion and apprehension written on his face. He looked over at Tarris who nodded and stepped into the full sunlight. Anna looked at him. It flashed for only a second but there was the waver of his skin, shifting darker then lighter. If he were an incubus the shift should have been more dramatic, she should have seen him as he was, if only for a split second. What exactly was he?

"Annie? Tarris won't harm you." She felt the touch of his hand on her arm. "He won't even touch you if you don't wish him to." He moved to stand behind her, his hands on her again, his lips on her skin. "I hope you will want him to, but he only came to help me find you. I had to find you, my darling."

She tried to stay focused on the man who might or might not be a dangerous creature but the feel of Luke's hands made it impossible. She heard a second voice speak, its deep sultry vibration swimming over her senses and her skin.

"I'll remove myself," the blond man spoke. "I cannot leave, or Luke would have to leave with me, but I'll remove myself."

"Don't," Luke stopped him. "Let him stay, Annie." The voice was soft and coaxing in her ear. "He is my friend, my lover, let him stay. He won't harm you. He'll stay over there."

"He'll just stay there? Watching us?" Anna felt the pull of the blond man's aura and the intoxication of Luke's touch assaulting her ability to think rationally.

"He needs this, he needs to feed off our energies but he won't touch if you don't want him to." So he was an incubus. The question was, was he real or an illusion? She'd played with the idea of Luke's being a vampire the first time he appeared. Perhaps she was seeking out an even more dangerous creature this time.

Luke turned her to face him, his smile was wickedly sexy. “Besides, imagine it, Annie. Him watching us. Him watching me take you, caress your body and fill you so deeply you cry for mercy.”

Something in her trembled violently. A sense of excitement stirred in her and joined the vortex of feeling that was spinning in that place just at the juncture of her thighs, making her body tingle and vibrate with need. She looked back over her shoulder in time to catch a sad look pass over the beautiful face before he turned and walked back into the shade of the tree. He sat down and pulled his knees up, his forearms crossing over them. His eyes met hers and there was no reproach, only a poignant longing.

Luke’s finger under her chin guided her gaze back to him. He kissed her and she pushed aside her worry. It was just her dream. If the blond man had really been an incubus he’d have shown himself dark and evil to her eye. She’d have seen the red eyes, the leathery wings, the horns. She’d have seen one of the dark ones. Luke’s tongue brushed hers and she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed against him. She had mistaken Luke for a vampire in the first dream and he wasn’t. Surely his friend was not one of the dark ones. *Besides*, a small fragment of logic burst through her brain as Luke swept his hand down to cup the curve of her ass, *neither of them is real. Nope, none of this is real, Anna, so shut up and enjoy your sex god while you can.*

She felt a soft hint of amusement brush her mind but it was gone as Luke took her hand and led her toward the water. Walking backward he pulled her after him into the pond at the base of the waterfall. Releasing her hand he turned and struck out with powerful strokes toward the falling water whose roar was the only sound in the clearing. She followed him to where he’d stopped, treading water at the base of the waterfall in front of large rocks that formed a platform. The spray from the falling water was a light mist around them. He lifted himself from the water and went to stand under the cascade that fell from the ledge of stone above them.

She watched him push his long mahogany-colored hair back off his face as the water pounded over his shoulders and ran down his chest. He turned his back to her

and faced the stone wall. Watching him carefully she pulled up onto the rocks. The fabric of the sarong now clung to her legs. She realized what he was doing only a split second before he slid the cargo shorts down his hips and tossed them off to the grass beside the pond.

She was sure some sort of exclamation was in order, an expression of approval, a statement of admiration but the sight of that tight, toned ass stole all words from her vocabulary. The skin was perfect except for another scar that puckered the flesh over one shoulder blade. It looked terrifyingly like a bullet wound. She moved in close as he stood there, letting the water wash over his body. Why would her mind produce a lover who bore such a mark? Her hand lifted of its own volition and touched the scar. He stiffened for a moment, then turned and looked into her eyes.

"How?" she barely got the word out before his lips claimed hers again. He swallowed her question and along with it any hesitation she felt about the man sitting several yards away. With Luke's tongue invading her mouth she forgot about him altogether. He pulled her to him and the water from the waterfall fell down over her. The sensation was sweetly erotic. The pounding water was just the perfect temperature and it made a delightful line of pressure across her shoulders and her back.

"This is not fair," he breathed against her ear as he brushed it with his lips. His hands moved over her skin and smoothed along the wet flesh until he held her breast in his hand. "One of us has on far too many clothes."

He eased her back to pull them out of the direct fall of water and turned her away from him. The mist rose up around them, wrapping them in a cool vapor that didn't chill but kept their bodies coated with a fine layer of beading moisture. She closed her eyes and leaned back against his chest. The warm flesh pressed to her made her moan softly, as his arms slid around her.

"Too many clothes," he repeated and his hands found the wet knot of the sarong and struggled to free it. It gave way and he tossed the cloth aside. His hands moved to massage her breasts. She opened her eyes slightly and saw the blond man sitting exactly

as he'd been. He was watching them, his face unreadable. He was watching Luke massage her breasts, watching as his thumbs moved over the hardened tips making her breath catch. The blue eyes followed Luke's hands as they moved up over her shoulders to untie the neck of her suit.

The wet straps slid deliciously along her skin, tickling her as Luke pulled them free. He let the top fall and her eyes locked on the face of the voyeur as he looked at her bare breasts. The look was no longer blank. The blue eyes now moved over her with apparent hunger as Luke untied the final strap of her top. It fell to the rocks before her and her lovers' hands were again on her breasts, rubbing his knuckles in a synchronous and tormenting motion over her nipples. She saw the other man's jaw clench tight. Suddenly his eyes locked on hers and she could see in them that he was aroused by her body, by watching Luke touch her.

It shocked her that she would find herself so willing to do this, so willing to stand before this strange man and allow her lovers' hands to expose her. Even more shocking was just how excited she was by his watching. Luke's fingers were pulling at the edges of her bottoms and she reached down to help him ease them over her hips and down her legs. She kicked them aside and leaned back, eyes still on the other man. What had Luke called him?

*Tarris.*

The word was in her head as if the man had spoken. *Tarris*. Luke's friend. His lover. As Luke slid one hand down to play with the soft dark hair, she groaned. He teased her. One hand rubbed her outer lips while the other tweaked and rolled her nipple between his forefinger and thumb. God she was turned on. More than she ever had been.

Luke circled her and reached for her hand. She longed for his fingers to return to their torment but his smile promised even greater delights if she complied. He walked her to the side of the ledge of rocks. A series of stones rose up as if they had been created to be steps. She stepped down into the pond and felt the water rise up to sooth

the heat that was burning in her pussy. The cool water did nothing to ease her need but rather lapped at her, just the right height to ripple against her but not to cover her.

Luke put his hands on her shoulders and turned her. "I want him to see this ass," he murmured against her ear. She wanted it too, or she must have, because in response to his words she found herself wiggling her hips and bending slightly to thrust the curve of her buttocks out toward Tarris. Luke chuckled and his hands smoothed over her back, moving lower until they cupped her backside, squeezing the mounds. His finger slid down the crevice between her cheeks and followed it until he found her opening and farther up, until he found her clitoris. Rubbing slowly with one hand he lifted hers and placed it on the stone ledge in front of her.

"So wet," he groaned softly, "You're ready for me, my love."

"Yes," she reached back and stroked his thigh as it pressed against hers. She wriggled her ass feeling the length of his cock brushing against her skin. She wanted him. She was on fire for him and needed him inside her.

"You don't care that he's watching?" Luke's voice was playful as he continued to stroke her clit with one hand, the other returning to play with her nipples.

"No," she muttered. "I don't care."

"You want him to see, don't you?" Luke pressed a kiss to her neck.

"Yes," she moaned. And she did. She wanted the blond man to watch Luke inside her. She wanted...

Luke moved beneath her and in a single slow thrust buried himself inside her pussy. She grabbed at the ledge as she cried out. His movements were slow and powerful as he withdrew and plunged into her again. She had both hands on the ledge now, holding on as his thick, long cock moved inside her. The water splashed around her, teasing the sensitive skin as he took her. She rocked back against him, meeting his movements. When his arm wrapped around her and pulled her up to lean against his chest she moaned softly. God he felt so good. Her upright position limited the

movements he could produce but each shift, each tiny thrust sent shock waves through her.

When he pulled out of her, she whimpered in protest. He pulled her tight against him and kissed her neck. "I'm not done, darling, don't worry." He hoisted himself back onto the rock and reached for her hand. She clambered up and he pulled her to lie down beside him. "Turn away from me," he kissed her, his mouth claiming hers hotly before releasing her so she could do as he asked.

It felt awkward at first when he lifted her leg up and draped it over his own but when he slid between her thighs and slipped the hard shaft back into her she felt as if she had suddenly become complete. Something was missing from her life and she now knew what that was. Luke. This dream man filled places inside her that no man in the real world ever had. She wondered for a moment if she might be going mad but lost all sense of the thought as he rolled them until she was lying on top of him.

His knees spread her legs wide and he braced his heels against the rock to anchor the thrusts that had her crying out in abandon. She pushed up into a sitting position. Faced away from him she could see the blond man again. She let her eyes lock with his. He was no longer sitting quietly but was standing against the tree with a pained expression on his face. The bulge in the tan pants made it obvious he was aroused by their display. She held his gaze as she added her own motions. She rode Luke hard and fast, rising up and coming down as if she wanted to drive him all the way through her body. Tarris' blue eyes were soft and gentle but there was no denying the hunger in them.

"Tarris," she whispered the name.

He moved instantly. His pants disappeared in a flash and she saw him stand, pausing for a moment so she could look at him. Oh God, he was perfect. Then he dove into the pool and swam the distance. He launched himself out of the water and reached for her. His hand hesitated and he waited. His scent made her head spin. His eyes seemed to make the sensations that were raging through her multiply. She saw his gaze

slip to Luke. Luke's hand reached for him and Tarris bent down to him. The hand touched Tarris' face and Anna watched over her shoulder in fascination as the men's lips met. She watched Luke's hand fist in the blond hair and pull his lover's head down, deepening the kiss. When Luke released him, Tarris pulled away to look at her, he was asking her permission with that look.

She repeated his name and was rewarded by a kiss like none she'd ever experienced. His mouth was sweet. She could feast on this mouth forever. His hands were busy. One caressed Luke's chest while the other cupped her breast and began to stroke her nipple. Beneath her, her lover resumed his movements and was pushing up into her. Her sigh of pleasure was lost in the kiss that ravaged her lips.

Tarris pushed on her shoulders and eased her back. Luke's movements were harder and faster than she'd have imagined given the position. She wasn't prepared for what happened next. Tarris slid off the rock ledge and reappeared between her knees. Luke widened his to push her legs apart even more. Moving up between them Tarris stroked both lovers gently before lowering his head. She had expected to feel his mouth but then realized it had gone first to Luke. The long pink tongue stroked up Luke's soft sac, then flickered against them both where he moved in and out of her. Finally it reached her clitoris and swirled around the hard nub. He repeated this motion again and again, adding the feel of his mouth to the pleasure they were both experiencing.

"Annie," Luke moaned. "Annie, Tarris."

She was confused at first until she saw Tarris lift his head and smile. She heard his voice as she felt his breath blow across her where she lay exposed, held open to him by Luke's legs. "Control freak. You always have to play the Dom don't you?" He winked at her before causing all breath to leave her body by closing his mouth around her clit and sucking softly. Tarris' hands rested on her legs and he matched the thrusting movements of the man beneath, bobbing his head in time to them so he could keep his tongue tormenting her.

The hard cock sliding in and out of her pussy, the tongue licking at her clit, Luke's hands pinching, tugging and teasing her nipples relentlessly drove her passions to a point she didn't recognize. She'd never been this high, never wanted release this much. The sounds coming from Luke's throat were turning into rumbling groans that shook his entire chest. She could just see Tarris' head between her legs, see the movement of his arm and knew he must be massaging the sensitive pouch of flesh between Luke's legs.

Her body felt as if it were whirling faster and churning harder than the whirlpool at the base of the waterfall that fell around them. "Don't stop," she cried out to both men, "Oh God, please don't stop."

She felt the moan of satisfaction that erupted from Tarris' throat. Felt it vibrate through her tormented nub and radiate out through her body. "Come Annie," she heard Luke growl out. "Come hard for us. Let him taste how much we please you."

The world exploded and she lost herself to the shattering eruption within. It rose and fell, her climax just ebbing before a second ripped through her. She heard cries of pleasure, the sounds of a body reaching release but she was no longer sure which came from her throat, which were Luke's and which were simply the roaring of her own blood in her ears.



## Chapter Three

Anna lay in the comfort of Luke's arms, stretched out on the soft grassy bank. Using his chest for a pillow, she watched Tarris stretched out on Luke's other side, sunning himself like a sleepy tiger. His eyes were closed and a faint smile curled his lips. She hadn't known contentment and peace like this in a long time.

"Annie," Luke's voice sounded thick. "I'm not much of a talking kind of guy but there are some things I need to tell you."

"M'hmm," she moaned and closed her eyes. This was definitely a dream. She'd twice now had the best sex of her life with a man who touched her in ways she couldn't have explained were she stupid enough to try. Said amazing sex-god-man had brought along a gorgeous friend and didn't mind sharing. She was stretched out in his arms feeling the warm sun, smelling the sweet grass and reveling in the lazy delights of after-glow. Now he wanted to talk? Damn was her subconscious was working overtime.

"You need to know two things, up front," his voice sounded serious. She shook off the lazy fatigue and tried to concentrate. "First, I care for you." The words were accompanied by a soft brush of fingers across her cheek. "There's something about you, Annie. I can't explain why just yet but when I'm with you I feel..." His voice trailed off.

"Complete." She offered the word and held her breath.

His voice held a hint of laughter, "Complete. Whole. Yes, my love. That's it exactly."

"I feel that way too," she pressed her lips to his skin as she spoke. Her mind screamed out the words her heart had been repeating since the first time she'd looked into his eyes. *If only you were real.*

His arms tightened for a second then he turned so that he could look down at her. His kiss warmed her body but it only fueled the cold ache of regret that had seized her heart. He wasn't real.

His next words came only after he'd lifted her chin to force her to look into his eyes. "This is going to be hard for you to believe but promise me you'll try." She nodded silently and waited to see what her dream man would say next. "Annie, this is a dream but I'm not. I'm real. Tarris is real. We exist outside your dreams."

She closed her eyes and shook her head. Her mind was certainly good at this game. He was telling her just what she wanted to hear at exactly the right moment. She opened her eyes and looked into his. "I wish you were, my darling. I really wish you were."

"I am. I'm real. My name is Lucas Ursine. I was born in Paris. I graduated from Princeton longer ago than I care to admit, or than you'd believe. I have a degree in architecture but pretty much I spend my time rehabbing old houses in rundown neighborhoods. I love the winter because the cold snowy weather is the perfect time to curl up with someone warm and be lazy. I'm the younger twin. I drive a red pickup truck, I listen to country music when I'm alone but heavy metal when I'm not because it annoys my brother – the king of easy listening."

A soft snorting laugh reminded her they were not alone. "Mark is so going to kick your ass when I tell him."

"Mark is your brother?" Anna was astonished at the complexity of the fantasy. Astonished and a little frightened. Had the disease finally progressed to her mind? She should have a few more years before that happened. Usually the lungs gave out before the dementia took hold.

"Yes." She caught the dark look he flashed to Tarris who stood up. He was mysteriously wearing the buckskin pants from earlier. He walked away from them as if to give them privacy or to avoid Luke's glare, she wasn't sure which.

"If you're real as you say you are, how is it you're in my dream? People can't just pop into other's dreams." *Unless they're incubi.* The incubus could do exactly that. Her eyes flew to Tarris.

"Yes," Luke toyed with a lock of her hair. "I told you the truth. Tarris is a friend of mine. He's an incubus."

"He doesn't look like an incubus, Luke," she started to reason.

"Seen a lot of them have you," he teased.

"No, I've never seen one before," she admitted. But she damned sure knew what they looked like.

"Even if you had, Tarris wouldn't look like what you'd expect. He's never known the hunger and desperation that drives them to the darkness. He's never hunted, never tasted an unwilling person. There are rules he follows and those rules keep him sane and safe. They also keep him from transforming completely." Luke glanced over toward his friend.

Anna looked at the man trying to see him but saw only a subtle shifting, a darkening of his skin for only the briefest of moments.

"Annie?" Luke spoke her name with an anxious tension. "Annie do you believe me? Do you believe I'm real?"

"I don't know," she whispered. "If you're real, why have you only come to me in dreams?"

"The first time I was as surprised as you," his dark brown eyes gazed down at her intently. "This time... Well, I didn't know who you were. I needed Tarris to help me find you."

She watched his face. She wanted to believe him but couldn't. "Prove it to me. If you are real, you'll be there when I wake up."

Luke frowned slightly and turned to look at Tarris who stood watching the water cascading down over the rocks.

"It is possible." Tarris turned the startling blue gaze on her. "I'm with you now in your room, Anna. I'm sitting on the edge of your bed. I can drop you into a dreamless sleep and when you wake, Luke will be there. But once I do, there is no going back. Neither of you can hide who you are from the other. Each will know the other's secrets."

The ominous words chilled Anna but she felt Luke's chest vibrate with laughter. "Shit, you sound more like a fortune cookie every day. Keep talking like that and someone's going to make you an Oracle."

A smile stretched across Tarris' face. He looked at Anna and shrugged. "All right but don't say I didn't warn you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Luke watched as Tarris walked over and laid his hand on Anna's head. Her eyes closed and she slumped against his chest. For a split second he could feel the weight of her in his arms and then he was jerking awake in the chair in Tarris' room. He stood and looked around him. A bright golden flash of light announced the incubus' arrival.

*She's asleep and waiting for you. I don't know how much time you have. It's early afternoon. She won't wake for a telephone or doorbell but if someone disturbs her, she'll wake.*

"Then let's go," Luke grabbed his shirt and stepped forward.

Tarris shook his head. *If I take you, how will you get home?*

"I'm sure Annie has a car," Luke rolled his eyes.

*She doesn't,* the other man stated firmly. *She doesn't drive.*

"Tarris, this isn't New York. People in St. Paul, Minnesota drive."

*Not Anna.*

Luke frowned at him. "What are you hiding?"

*More than your puny Were mind could ever understand if you puzzled it the rest of your days.*

"You've always been an arrogant little bastard."

Tarris didn't rise to the bait. Mark would have been lunging for him but Tarris just shook his head and gave an annoyingly smug mental chuckle. He crossed to a small desk near a window and scribbled something on a piece of paper. When he handed it to Luke, he realized it was Anna's address. She was only a mile or so away in a small subdivision that had gone up just in the last few years.

"I owe you," Luke jerked Tarris into a quick hug and hurried out the door.

He pulled up to the small bungalow-style house and sat for a minute staring at it. True enough, there was no car in the driveway. But what puzzled him the most was the ramp that extended from the front steps to the paved pathway through the front yard. Luke slid out of the truck and headed up the walkway. He half expected to see Annie come bursting through the door. A smile crept up on him. Would she be excited to see him? Would she throw herself in his arms? Damn, he hoped so.

Reaching the front door, he checked to make sure no one was looking before pressing his palm against the lock in the door knob. The click of the lock tumblers released the bolt and he pushed it open and stepped inside. A beeping led him to her alarm pad and he laid his hand over it. It silenced immediately. Luke looked around the room. Neat and tidy. Okay, he could adjust to neat and tidy. Right now he cared about something else a lot more. He moved cautiously toward the back of the house. Bedrooms were always in the back, right?

The soft smell of her was everywhere in this house but he found her easily enough in the larger of the two bedrooms. The blinds were drawn and he saw her figure stretched out on the bed. The lighting of the room made her face seem pale and drawn. She coughed deeply and shifted in her sleep. The movement pushed back the blanket and he could see her shoulders, the collarbone protruding in a way that shocked him. Her body was thinner than his eyes and hands had told him. She coughed again, a low racking cough that rumbled and the sleeper had to fight for air.

Then he saw it sitting a few steps away from the bed. The black canvas and foam, the metal frame, the large motor on the back—a wheelchair. Next to it, on the nightstand was a rectangular box with dials and buttons. Flexible white tubing hung from it, ending in what looked seemed to be mouthpiece. It looked like something he'd seen on television. One of the human medical shows that had appalled him with its barbarism. Slicing people open, shoving tubes in their bodies. He honestly didn't know how humans survived their own healing practices.

She was ill. His mate was ill. His heart slowed down and suddenly felt heavy, as if the mating stone in his pocket had suddenly settled there. The lovers' stone. It would trap her spirit with his. She'd grow strength from him. It could—damn it, it would—heal her. Luke took a deep breath and approached the bed. He slipped off his jacket and shoes and slid in beside her. She curled onto her side as if subconsciously accommodating his presence. Slipping up behind her he pressed his body to hers and wrapped his arm around her. He held her tightly for a moment, drinking in the feel and scent of her before he spoke.

"Annie," he whispered softly in her ear. "Annie, I'm here."

Her eyes fluttered open slowly. "Luke?"

"Yes, my love." He nuzzled her ear and kissed her cheek.

She smiled softly. "Am I still dreaming or are you really here?" She lifted his hand from where it had lain pressed to her stomach and kissed it. "You feel real."

He smiled. "I am real and I know your secret now, my love."

"Not all of them," she said softly.

"You'll tell me later, then." He buried his face in her sweet smelling hair. "We have a lifetime to tell secrets. For now, rest." He watched, pleased, as she smiled and closed her eyes. She wiggled slightly, pressing back closer against him.

Luke held her this way for nearly an hour before he rose, replaced his shoes, grabbed his jacket and left the bedroom. She'd be hungry when she woke up. He wasn't sure what the hell was happening to him but he had the irrepressible urge to take care

of the woman. He was standing in her kitchen, the kettle and a pan of soup heating on the stove. He was cooking. He was cooking for someone else. Luke shook his head in amazement. God Mark would never let it rest if he could see him now. He had no idea what the hell was going on here but he was fairly certain what Sarah would say. The same thing she said when she gently chastised him for teasing Mark. "When you're in love you think of others first."

That goddamned rock was living up to its name. He was in love. He wondered if Annie could accept that. Sarah had told him she'd had trouble believing that Mark could love her so quickly and so devotedly. But it was their nature. Bears clung to and protected what was theirs. They fought brutally and viciously to defend those they loved. And Annie was his. She may not know it yet but she belonged to him. He realized he was grinning and rolled his eyes at himself. Who knew? Who knew this was inside him all along.

He set the table and turned the heat off on the stove before going to wake her. As he passed through the living room something caught his eye. A sparkle of silver and gold glinted from the mantelpiece. He walked to it. In a wooden display case hung a pendent of silver and gold, a large sun with a silver center and golden rays emanating from it. His blood froze in his veins. His eyes pulled away from it and swept the photographs that flanked it. On one side, an old photo of an elderly man and woman, both wearing this design around their necks. To the other side sat a family portrait. A very young Annie stood next to a handsome young man. Seated in front of them were a woman and a man. It was the man who caused Luke to curse loudly. He too wore the hated symbol of the hunters around his neck.

She was a hunter. His Annie was one of the hunters. "Son of a bitch," he ground out.

He heard the quiet whir of the motor behind him and spun. She sat there looking at him confused before her expression changed to one of terror.

\* \* \* \* \*

She'd come around the corner to find him standing at the hearth. His broad back, dark hair, oh God, he was real. The man who made her feel as if she'd found everything that was missing in her life was real. Then she heard Luke's curse and was shocked. Shocked until he turned to face her. His features flickered suddenly in her *see'er's* vision.

"No," she cried out weakly. His face morphed before her eyes. The brown eyes glowed a dark gold and one side of his features stretched and pulled out creating a warped and horrifying mask that was half human and half animal. The space behind him shimmered with a corona of light that took the shape of a large hulking animal. A bear.

"You're a Were," she gasped. Her hand hit the lever on her chair and she backed away. She had to get to it. Had to find it.

"And you're a hunter," he snarled. "Isn't fate just fucking lovely? I find my mate and she's hunter." He took a step toward her.

Anna continued to ease backward. "Your what?"

"My mate," his hand pulled something from his pocket. A large red stone glowed in his hand. "So much for happy-ever-after, eh?"

Anna backed until she reached the table beside the sofa. "How can I be your mate?"

"Don't ask me. Ask this," he gestured with the hand that held the stone.

"What is it?"

"My mating stone, the stone that binds my soul to that of my mate. Don't tell me the hunters don't know about them? I thought you were all omniscient," he sneered. "Something you murderers don't know about us, is there?"

The words hit the sore spot inside her. The man her father had killed by mistake, the heartbroken cries of his children as the reporters filmed them at the scene of his death and the sobbing face of his wife as she sat in the courtroom weeping twisted in



her mind. She kept her eyes on him and watched his eyes narrow as she pulled open the drawer quickly and pulled out her father's pistol. He looked at her for a moment and then laughed.

"Woman, you better have a lot of bullets in that thing," he stepped closer.

"Stay back," she pointed the gun at his chest. Her hands were shaking as they held tight to the grip. "It's loaded with silver bullets."

He laughed again and continued toward her deliberately. "Then you'd better hit my heart on the first shot, 'cause otherwise it's just going to seriously piss me off."

He closed the space between them and her brain screamed at her to shoot. He stopped in front of her. "Come on, Annie, at this range you can surely hit my heart." She could. She'd been a champion shot when her arms had been strong enough and at the moment his heart wasn't two full feet from the end of the barrel.

She looked into his eyes and pushed past her *see'er's* vision. She saw him, for the first time in the flesh, real. She looked into his eyes and saw not the anger and pain that hovered there but the passion, the adoration, the kindness she'd seen in her dreams.

"Come on, Annie, shoot!"

She couldn't. The gun lowered into her lap and she closed her eyes. She felt his hands take the weapon from her grasp. Somewhere in the back of her mind she wondered if he'd kill her with it. Or would he simply rip out her throat as she'd always been warned.

She heard a click followed by a series of clinking sounds. She looked up at him and watched him empty the bullets one by one onto the polished wood floor, staring hard at her. Empty, he laid the gun back in her lap and crouched down. He still looked angry but there was also confusion etched in the lines of his face. "Why?" he demanded. "Why didn't you shoot me? I'm a Were, Annie. I'm a mindless, merciless killer. Why didn't you shoot me?"

She shut her eyes and didn't answer. His hands closed around her shoulders and shook her slightly. "Look at me. Why didn't you shoot? You're a hunter. Why didn't you kill me, or at least try to?"

"I couldn't," she whispered meeting his gaze. His brown eyes were still hard and searching.

"Why? It's who you are."

"No," she shook her head and felt the first tear start to slide down her cheek. "I'm not a hunter. I've never been a hunter. My family but not me. I'm sick. The ancient healers call it *Lunis Pestia*. The moon's curse. It strips our bodies of strength and life. Attacking our lungs, our muscles. Killing us slowly."

"Not good enough. You were raised to hate people like me, why didn't you shoot?" His fingers dug harshly into her skin and she heard a sense of desperation in his voice that matched what was in her heart. "Annie, answer me! The truth."

"Because I love you." She started to cry in earnest now, burying her face in her hands. She heard him groan. Suddenly she was being lifted from her chair. The gun clanked uselessly to the floor and skittered away from them as he cradled her in his arms. A few short steps had them on the sofa. He settled her beside him and pulled her into his embrace. He kissed her so softly it surprised her. His lips moved from hers to brush her damp cheeks.

"Don't cry, Annie. Don't," he brushed away the tears with his fingers and continued to spread gentle kisses over her face. "We'll figure this out. We'll make it work. You're my destined mate, my one love. My soul mate, my darling. We'll make it work."

She touched his cheek, "I'm your mate? How?"

He shook his head with a soft huff of confused mirth. "The lovers' stone chose you for me, sweetheart. That's all I know. It chose you for me and I love you. You are my mate, the only one I can ever have."

She nestled her face against his neck as he held her. "But my disease, Luke, I haven't very long before...you can't tie yourself to someone who is going to die."

"Shh," he pressed his lips to her forehead. "We are all going to die sooner or later. But I promise you it will be much later. Once we mate, our spirits are joined and the power of mine will heal you. There is a reason we live so long, Annie. A reason we are so hard to kill. Our spirits are stronger than you could ever imagine."

He'd heal her. He loved her and he would heal her.

"Annie," he pulled back frowning. "Will you? Will you be my mate? You can say no if the idea of being mated to..." he hesitated, "a Were is..." He paused again. "I know what I am is as repugnant to you as the hunters are to my people. Can you accept me?"

"Can you accept me?" she pressed back. "Can you accept the daughter, the sister of a hunter?"

He looked at her seriously. "As long as you promise not to point that gun at me again, I'm willing to work it out." A slow smile started to curl his lips.

"As long as you promise not to eat anyone I know I'm willing to try too." She gave him a wicked grin in return. He laughed out loud and she felt a large piece of the tension break. Luke met her kiss then and she relaxed into him reveling in the feel of his hands on her body.

Their tongues danced and she had her hands up under his t-shirt and was held against him by his strong arm when she heard it.

"What the hell?" The voice came from the kitchen door. Luke pulled away sharply and stood to face the man who glared at them from just inside the archway between the kitchen and dining room. His expression was stone cold as he stared at the gold and silver sun pendant that hung from Jack's neck.

## **Chapter Four**

"Jack," Anna reached up and placed a hand against Luke's. "What are you doing here? Since when don't you knock?"

The two men watched each other carefully. "I came in the back. I need to use the basement to store something."

"Luke," Anna felt her heart pounding wildly in her chest. "This is my brother, Jack. Jack, this is Luke. He's a friend."

"I noticed," the two still refused to break eye contact. "He needs to leave, Anna. I need to talk to you, it's important and private."

"Fine," she tried to control her breathing. God if Jack found out what Luke was...

Luke looked down at her startled. "We can talk in the kitchen. Luke, do you mind waiting here for a minute?" She saw the muscles in his jaw relax slightly and he gave a curt nod. He'd wait but it was clear he was damned unhappy about it. "Jack, get my chair."

"I'll do it," Luke said flatly. He surprised her by picking her up and carrying her to her chair. Jack backed away slightly as they approached.

As he bent to settle her in place she whispered quietly. "He can't tell. He's mind-blind." Luke looked into her eyes for a moment and again nodded.

Anna backed away from Luke and followed Jack into the kitchen. "Who the hell is he?" Jack rounded on her as soon as they were out of sight of the living room.

"How dare you? What are you doing barging into my house? And what was that back there? You could at least have been civil. You know, said 'excuse me' instead of glaring at Luke like some outraged maiden aunt," Anna shot back.

"Who is he, Anna?" Jack demanded.

"My..." she searched for the right words. Future mate would not go over well and neither would lover. "My boyfriend."

"Your boyfriend?" Jack snorted. "Then why haven't you mentioned him before? You seem very well acquainted with him."

"Because I don't exactly make a habit of discussing my sex life with my brother," the words flew out of her mouth and she watched Jack turn bright red. Anna sighed. "What did you want to talk to me about? I know you didn't come here to give me the third degree about Luke."

Jack cast an angry glance at the door as if he could strike out at the man in the other room with it. "I need to store something in your basement for a couple of hours and I need you to take a look at it. Confirm for me what it is."

Anna felt as if ice water had just been injected into her veins. "Well you jumped in with both feet, didn't you?" This was not going to go well. If Luke found out he had...well whatever he had, he would not take it well.

"I sort of got the idea that was the point," Jack slumped against the low kitchen counter. "My *see'er* handed it off to me. I'm supposed to hold it until nightfall, then dispose of it."

"Dispose of what?" The sick dread was starting to reach an overwhelming level.

"They said it's one of the fey, a gnome. But Anna," Jack's voice shook slightly. "I need you to confirm it. Tell me what it is. It doesn't look like a gnome. It looks like a small child."

"Then if I were you I'd be very careful," Luke's voice made them both jump. He was standing in the doorway, dark chocolate eyes shooting daggers at Jack. He turned that glare on Anna. "I thought you said you weren't a hunter."

"I'm not," Anna rushed to reassure him. Justified or not, the harsh look in those eyes frightened her. "I'm not a hunter."

Jack was standing straight now, staring at Luke with an expression that went beyond apprehension. "What do you know of hunters?" He swung his hazel regard to his sister. "What have you told him?"

"Nothing," Anna felt as if she were suddenly drowning in the fear, anger and paranoia that was filling the room. "Both of you calm down. Jack, Luke knows about the hunters. You don't need to know how," she forestalled the question that was poised on his lips. "He knows. Luke, I told you my brother was a hunter. I'm not. Please try to see that this is difficult for me as well." She met his eyes and he nodded.

"I know that," he said softly.

Anna took a deep breath. "Where is it?"

"In the basement. I took it in through the outside entrance and came up the stairs. Anna I don't..." Jack swallowed and glanced at Luke and lowered his voice. "I don't want to make the same mistake Dad made. Will you look at it?"

"Yes," she agreed. Luke stared at her incredulously and she saw the hint of betrayal in his face before it turned to granite.

"And if it is a gnome, will you help him kill it?" his voice was even and dull.

"No one is killing anything in my house," she said firmly to both men. "I said I'd look at it."

Jack reached to lift her out of her chair, clearly intending to carry her down the steps to the basement but Luke stepped up to the chair in a way that was a clear challenge. Her brother backed off reluctantly. Luke lifted her and shouldered past her brother toward the door. "Trust me," she whispered. Luke did not respond.

As soon as her vision cleared the overhang over the stairs she saw him. He was bent over a small iron cage and was opening the door.

"Tarris!"

The word sprang out of her mouth and Luke had to practically jump the last two steps to stay on his feet, holding her to his chest as Jack pushed past him. Her heart nearly stopped when she saw the gun in her brother's hand.

"Get away from that cage," Jack hissed at the blond man.

Luke was carefully lowering her on to the steps. Tarris looked at them for a moment, the blue eyes met hers before he turned, ignoring Jack and swung the door to the cage open.

"I said get away from it." Jack stepped closer with the gun pointed at Tarris' bare back.

*Doesn't this guy ever wear a shirt?* The errant thought touched her brain lightly.

The tiny creature inside looked more like a small child of about three or four than any dark creature. It was curled on a small nest of rags trying hard not to touch the iron of the cage. Iron was as unnatural and harmful to the fey as silver to the Were, more so in fact. The Were could stand the trace touches of silver and even if shot could fight off its effects if the bullet did not pierce a vital organ. The silver nitrate bullets were another story. Based on the old cop-killers—a type of outlawed human ammunition—they exploded on entry and sprayed the surrounding tissue with liquid silver. It wasn't a death she wanted to think about.

She heard the shot fired before she realized what was happening. Just as the bullet would have ripped through the incubus there was a bright light and Tarris dematerialized long enough for the bullet to pass through him and lodge in the wall behind him. Jack's eyes widened and he didn't see Luke come behind him. Luke's clenched fists swung as hard as if he they held a tennis racket and he was aiming for match point. They struck Jack in the back and sent him flying forward onto his face. A second flash of light and Tarris was standing on Jack's wrist while prying the gun from his hand. He held it dangling from two fingers as if it were a vile piece of trash he was forced to handle. He flung it away from them and moved back toward the cage.

*I had a feeling I'd need to watch your back tonight, baby bear.* His head shook as he knelt back down before the crate. Anna heard the voice she associated with the incubus fill her mind. She remembered the lore she'd been force-fed as a child. The incubus didn't speak. They were mute in the waking world. Or rather it seemed they spoke other than with voices.

Tarris reached inside and pulled the child from its prison. As soon as it cleared the dangers of the iron box it shimmered in Anna's vision. The child was gone and she saw the wrinkled little face and the pointed little nose of the gnome.

"Put me down," it demanded of its rescuer. "Let me at him." It was snarling and hissing at Jack who was just starting to move. Its tiny pointed shoes were kicking at Tarris viciously.

*Stop! You keep kicking me, little friend, and I'm going to take it personally.* Tarris sounded amused despite what had transpired.

Jack struggled to rise. Luke's foot came to rest on his back. He stopped and looked up warily. "If you get up, you do it knowing that if you go for my friends again, I won't check my strength." Again the lore floated to Anna's mind. A Were's strength had almost no limit. They could easily kill a human with a single blow.

Anna watched her brother nod and he stood slowly. He turned to look at them. His eyes swung from Luke to Tarris and rested on the creature in his arms. It was no longer hiding its true form. "I should have trusted my gut and killed you."

"Human scum," the little gnarled face was twisted even more hideously with its rage.

*Easy little fey, Tarris frowned, you'll hurt yourself doing that. Do not judge all of a race by the acts of a few. The female would not have harmed you.*

He met Anna's eyes and smiled at her softly. *Would you?* She shook her head.

Jack was staring at the incubus. "What are you?"



"Jack, stop it," Anna spoke up for the first time. "Tarris, I think it's best if you take your friend and go."

Tarris frowned at her and exchanged a prolonged look with Luke she was sure included a conversation from which she had been excluded. Finally Tarris nodded. *Your brother can't hear me, Anna but he is very frightened. Frightened people do stupid things. Keep our Luke safe.* As the light from his departure faded she finally shifted her eyes to her brother.

"What the hell was that and why did it do what you told it to?" His words ground out angrily.

"Tarris does what he chooses," Anna replied. "Life is not about commanding people, Jack. It's not black and white, good and bad. There are no pure heroes and villains. You're too old to believe that anymore."

"What I'm getting too old to believe is that just because I might love someone, they must be good," his eyes were angry. He took a step toward her and Luke stepped between them. Jack glared at him. "What are you?"

Anna held her breath praying Luke wouldn't answer. "I am your sister's mate, or I will be."

"Mate?" Jack repeated the word in a whisper. He shook his head in disbelief. "What does that mean? Humans don't use that word."

"No, they generally don't," Luke leaned against the end of the stair rail and crossed his arms over his chest. God he was arrogant. Cocky, arrogant and so damned sure of himself he made her feel safe even when she was terrified of what was going to happen next.

She closed her eyes at the pained confusion that spread on her brother's face. It was time to stop this. "Luke is a Were, Jack and I've agreed to be his mate."

"His mate? You would whore yourself with the very creatures our family has sought to protect the world from for generations?" Jack took another step toward them and stopped when Luke dropped his feigned indifference and stood up straight.

"You're only alive right now, human, because it would hurt her to watch me kill you." Luke's eyes burned with fury and Anna saw the glow of the bear around him brighten. His face flickered its animal nature and she knew he was pressing the limits of his control to stop his transformation and attack. And he was doing it for her.

"And I'm just supposed to stand here and let it happen? Is that it Anna? I'm just supposed to stand here and let you spit on centuries of tradition?" Jack's voice was eerily quiet.

Anna saw what Luke didn't but only because she knew about it. She knew about the arm bows her father had designed and had made. They were supposed to have been for her. She was the *see'er*. She was supposed to have been the next great hunter. She saw Jack reach up and rub his right arm with his left hand. She knew the motion. Her father had trained her with the weapon. He was shifting the gas firing cartridge into place. When Jack lifted his arm again, a flick of his wrist would send a silver bolt firing straight at Luke.

Anna forced herself to her feet and shoved Luke as hard as she could. Jack's hand came up but instead of dead center aim at the chest of the Were, the small arrow struck his sister's shoulder. Anna screamed in pain and her legs gave out as much from the shock as from the sheer exertion of standing. Luke dropped beside her, saw what had happened and started after Jack with a growl that screamed his blood lust. With her last strength she grabbed his hand and cried, "No!" The cough started deep in her and her body shook with it. She gasped for air and could get none.

As the world grew dark, the last thing she saw was Luke's face as he gathered her up in his arms. She heard him yell as the edges of her vision turned black.

"Tarris!"

When she came to, she felt warm. A dull throb pulsed in her shoulder. A hand was touching her face gently with a damp cloth. She opened her eyes and found herself looking into stormy green-gray eyes that were regarding her with a mixture of pleasure

and curiosity. "Good," the voice was musical, soothing. "Finally. I was afraid I was going to lose my sister-in-law before I ever got to meet her."

Anna tried to shift but the pain stopped her. "Easy," the woman tsked and helped her into a sitting position. "You're going to be fine but it will take a while since you're human." The face broke into a smile. "So am I by the way. I'm Sarah. Luke's brother is my mate."

Anna searched her memory. "Mark, Luke's brother is Mark."

"Yes," The woman stood up but returned quickly with a glass filled with cool water. "Here, this will help. Something about the healing dehydrates the body."

As she sipped the water the woman straightened the blankets. The blonde's chatter was an odd combination of reassurance and nervousness. "At least I hope it works the same on humans. Mostly it's my mate's family who find themselves recuperating here." She glanced up at Anna, "You're at the family house. My home and Mark's. He's the *Amar*, the leader of our people. They come to him for help just as Tarris did tonight."

"Your mate healed me?" Anna couldn't imagine such a thing. He couldn't know what she was or he would surely have let her die.

"Yes," Sarah nodded. "As *Amar* he holds the life force of the people in his hands. It's one of the things that came to him as leader. He has an overwhelming responsibility for their lives." When she'd drained the glass, Sarah took it from her fingers and set it on the night stand. "We weren't sure it would work with you, being human and not yet mated to Luke. But there is enough of him inside you, enough of a bond between you, Mark was able to follow it and heal the wound in your shoulder."

"Where is Luke?" Anna couldn't hold the question any longer. A part of her was terrified that something had happened to him. She may have taken the arrow but that wasn't the only weapon Jack had had, she was certain of it.

Sarah hushed her, "Don't worry. When you were hurt he called for Tarris. Tarris can only transport one being at a time. Luke pushed you into his arms, told him to bring you here. I'm sure he's on his way. Let's hope he didn't hit a traffic jam or that's going

to be some serious road rage." The woman's chuckle should have made her feel better but it didn't.

"What about my brother?"

"Your brother was the hunter?" Anna nodded and the sweet, pretty face grew harsh and stern. "I'm not sure. Tarris grabbed you and got you here as soon as he could. All he knew was that Luke was holding you, you were bleeding and having trouble breathing and the hunter was on his knees on the floor. Tarris left again as soon as he got you into our hands, I expected him to follow with Luke but he didn't."

A sick fear filled crept in slowly. "You don't think they would have killed him?"

"Your brother?" Sarah shook her head. "I'm pretty sure that's what Tarris went back to prevent. If he went back."

Several minutes passed in silence. She didn't want to speak to the woman, as nice as she seemed. She didn't want to think about what might have happened after Tarris took her out of the basement. She didn't want to think about what it would mean if Luke had killed her brother. She hated Jack right now. But she couldn't deny she still loved him.

The door to the room flew open with a bang and she heard a male voice very similar to Luke's demanding, "Calm down, I told you she's fine for the moment."

Two versions of Luke came through the door. One neatly dressed and looking peeved. The other one wore a t-shirt stained with blood beneath a worn leather jacket. This was the man who bolted to her side and dropped beside the bed. He grabbed for her as Sarah called out, "Easy Luke, be careful."

He seemed to check himself and reached to cup her face. "Are you okay?"

She smiled at him and placed her hand over his. "I'm all right. It hurts but I'm fine."

Luke lifted up to sit beside her on the bed and gently pulled her into his arms. He pressed his face into her hair. "Gods, I was so scared. I'm going to kill Tarris."

"What did Tarris do?" Sarah's voice sounded worried.

"He refused to transport Luke back here. Said he had something more important to do and the drive would calm Luke down and give me time to work before he was in here wreaking havoc." The man Anna quickly realized was Luke's twin, Mark, wore a wry grin.

"More important," grumbled Luke against her cheek before he kissed her quickly. "I'll give him more important."

"Luke," Anna pushed him back. "Where's Jack?"

The dark eyes flared with anger and the curled lip exposed the elongated incisors. "He's fine, Anna. Not because I have any compassion for him. I couldn't give a shit he was horrified by what happened. I couldn't give a shit he was kneeling on the floor with tears on his face because of what he'd done. His remorse means nothing to me and if it had been my choice, he'd be dead."

"Luke!" Sarah cried out. Her mate put his arm around her.

"Sarah, he nearly killed Tarris, Luke and Anna. My brother's right. He deserved to die. And as *Amar* I want to know why he still lives, Brother." Mark's eyes were just as hard and cold as Luke's. "He attacked three members of this family, why does he live?"

Anna breathed a sigh of relief. Jack was alive. The man she loved hadn't killed him. She didn't know what she'd have done if that had happened.

Luke turned to face his brother. "He lives because he is my soul mate's brother. He lives because of what it would do to her if I killed him." He turned to Anna and his face was deadly serious. "But no more mercy, Anna. If he comes for this family again, he will die even if I have to be the one who does it."

"The rules of this family are different," Sarah's voice was shaking. "They can be hard for us to accept."

"No, they may be different to you but not to me." Anna folded her hand around Luke's. "I was reared a hunter. My brother will be considered weak by our people if anyone finds out what he did. He could easily be punished. He should have killed me

the minute I called out to Tarris. He should have killed me the moment I showed any sympathy to the dark ones. My father would have."

Mark nodded. "We are agreed then. Sarah, let's leave these two alone. I'm sure they want to discuss the weather or something of equal importance." A wicked grin that looked very much like Luke's flashed on the handsome face before he steered his mate out of the door. He paused before closing it behind him. "Luke," he waited for his brother to look at him. "I fixed what I could. It's up to you now. I can't..." He shook his head, the handsome face sad. "I can't."

## Chapter Five

Luke turned back to the woman the lovers' stone had chosen as his mate. Her face was pale and he could see the blue tinge around her lips. Her hands felt cold in his. Mark had told him as he followed him up the stairs to her that he had healed what he could of her shoulder but could not heal the sickness in her. Only mating could do that. She'd lost a lot of blood and there was not enough of a bond yet for him to be able to heal her completely. All he'd been able to do was stop the bleeding and close the wound. It would take time for her body to repair itself.

But the sense Mark had gotten of her illness was far beyond what Luke had realized. As he stood blocking Luke's path, even defying his threats to strike his own brother and, tribunal be damned, his *Amar* if he didn't get out of his way, Mark told him that the disease was virulent and vicious. "Her body is turning against itself. It's genetic, caused by the inbreeding among the hunters. Exactly the sort of thing Grandfather spent centuries warning the purists among our kind of. Exactly what is killing off the angelus as the humans whittle down their numbers and they refuse to breed with other species."

Luke had dismissed this until Mark had yelled after him. "She's going to die Luke and die soon if you don't mate with her." The words had fueled the panic in his chest to an even hotter conflagration. He wouldn't lose her.

He lay down next to her and wrapped his arms around her, holding her close as her head rested on his chest. "Anna, we need to complete the mating soon."

"I know," she whispered back. "This has weakened me, Luke. I know it. My body can't replenish what it's lost. It also can't repair the damage as it normally should. I am, right now, the best I will ever be."

"So we do this now?" Luke looked into her eyes and smiled brightly. "I mean, I know it's a real sacrifice on both our parts but if it's for the greater good, I'll suck it up and do my duty." He leaned down and kissed her, taking great joy in the feel of her in his arms, in the taste of her lips.

"As soon as we can," she agreed. "What will happen? Is there a ceremony? Is it like a human wedding?"

Luke stared at her. He'd expected her to know about the Were matings. She was from the hunters. Did they really understand so little about the creatures they hunted? A piece of his brain cataloged the information to share with Mark. It seemed their nemesis had serious gaps in their understanding, the question was could they use them to their advantage?

"Annie," he watched her eyes, "we don't have weddings. Well, Mark and Sarah did but that was for her family's benefit. Once a couple mates, their family usually holds a celebration and the *Amar* and *Amari* give their blessing to the couple."

"And Mark will give us his blessing," she sounded so certain and relieved.

"I don't know why not, he's mated to a human so he has no grounds to object. The only time in history someone did object formally was when my grandfather mated to my grandmother. She too was human. His brother challenged and they ended up resolving it in the traditional way." Luke grimaced. Sarah had not taken this little bit of information well. "My grandfather was forced to kill his brother to keep his mate."

Anna's eyes left his and she frowned. "But Mark won't object?"

Luke beamed at her. "No, in fact as my closest living relative he has to foot the bill for the party and we are going to blow the roof off." His smile weakened, "But I have to be honest with you, Annie. That's one thing I won't do, lie to you. I objected to Mark mating with Sarah at first. Because she was human. But later..." he hurried the words, "I realized she was probably the best thing that could happen to our family and that my quarrel with Mark had nothing to do with her in reality."

"Would you have killed him?"



Luke sighed. "I don't know. I never got the chance to find out. Sarah stopped us fighting. Said she'd leave, she wouldn't be the source of the bloodshed. It snapped both of us back. I saw her face, she was just standing there looking so heartbroken but so determined. It was then I realized it wasn't about her. We still fought but for the real reasons. At least we did until Tarris intervened."

"I think you're a wee bit in love with her," Anna smiled at him. He looked at her sharply. There was no sense of jealousy or anger. Her smile was teasing and gentle.

"I think we all are," he admitted quietly. "She's like no one I've ever known before. She's perfect for Mark. She made him who he is today, which is a damned good leader." He leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. "But I'd rather not talk about them. I'd rather take my mate."

"You still haven't told me what that means," she chuckled as she ran her fingers over his jaw.

"Simple. We make love," he kissed her. Her soft lips yielded under his as he pressed her back into the pillows. He explored her mouth tasting her breath and feeling the sharp little teeth against his tongue. He nipped her lower lip as he pulled back and went to shrug out of his jacket. Freeing his arms he pulled the lovers' stone from his pocket and set it on the table by the bed. He'd be needing that later.

"Can you do it?" she asked puzzled. "Don't we need Tarris?"

Luke laughed. "Sweetheart there are some things for which my dear friend and lover is handy, however, mating it is best left to you and me. Or did you like his touch so much you'll not want me on my own any longer." He brushed her hair back from her face.

"You mean we'll actually make love?" there was a note of panic in her voice. "Not in a dream?"

Luke frowned. "No, for this I'd rather we were both wide awake. Besides mating has to be in the flesh. Annie? If you don't want this, just say so. If you want to wait, we will. Was it Tarris you wanted?" He was jealous by nature true, but for the first time in

his life jealousy of his friend reared its head. The sensation burned and made him feel sick.

She closed her eyes and her breath escaped her in a slow sigh that sank her chest. "No," she looked up at him and her eyes seemed wet and bright. "I want to be your mate. I adore Tarris but it's you I want, Luke. I love you."

Luke kissed her forehead and cheeks, tender loving caresses on her face as he moved back toward her mouth. His mate. He felt a swelling in his chest and in his cock. He would finally know the feel of her true flesh holding him, of her soft cries in his waking ears. He moved to her mouth and pushed his tongue between the petal soft lips and began to stroke the outer curve of her breast as he started the acts that would lead to the binding of their spirits.

"I told you he wouldn't wait," A wheezing voice sneered from very near his head making him jump. "Impatient, all the Weres. Would kill his own mate in his lust."

Luke sat up and reached for the intruder only to find his hand stopped, by the grip of another on his wrist.

*Easy, Tarris' voice soothed his anger instantly making him feel calm and even more aroused as it cascaded through his mind. Try not to hurt my little friend. He's come to repay a kindness.*

Luke looked at the small gnome sitting on the pillow. His pointed cap covered a rather pointed head. The same wizened face he'd seen in the darkness of Annie's cellar looked up at him and then over to her.

"And you'd just let him do it, eh? Bet she didn't even tell him he'd kill her by it." The wrinkled face twisted even more. "Sexual reproduction. Makes you all crazy and rash. If you budded like gnomes, you wouldn't be so foolish."

"That's disgusting," Luke grimaced.

"Oh and you about to rut with her blood still upon you isn't? I suppose it's fitting since she'll be dead beneath you before you're done." The little creature stood up. "I'm leaving."

*No you're not*, Tarris said simply and the little gnome stared at him with contempt but sat back down.

Luke looked down at her face. She wasn't shocked as she sat there leaned against the covers looking pale and wan. She wouldn't meet his eye. "Is it true?"

She nodded and his heart plummeted in a free fall at her words. "I've been warned for some time I'm not strong enough for sex. I can't even stand, Luke."

"Why didn't you tell me?" his anger soared up to fill the empty spot in his chest. "Annie, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I wanted it. I wanted to know what it was like to touch you, truly to feel you inside me. Before tonight, maybe I'd have had a chance. You said the mating would heal me. Maybe it would have worked fast enough. But not now." A tear slipped down her cheek.

Luke sat back on his heels, numb. If he coupled with her, if they mated she'd die. If they didn't, she'd die, only more slowly. He looked up at Tarris. The tall man at his side laid a hand on his shoulder. His aura and scent wrapped around Luke but it didn't help. He closed his burning eyes. No weakness. He couldn't show weakness but the pain of the reality was ripping through him.

*Don't*, Tarris' voice was soft and oddly reassuring. *It will be all right. I promise you.*

Luke opened his eyes and looked into the depths of two very different sets of blue eyes. First, Tarris' which seemed to flicker like blue flames, then his Annie's, cool and comforting as the waters of a warm sea. "How? How can it be all right?"

The gnome snorted.

*Go on, little friend.*

"You're being a fool," the wrinkled old face admonished him. "It's you I owe the favor. You'd throw away a life debt on them. They'd not do so much for you. Why give them this when it only means that you won't..."

*Do it!* There was a power and finality to those two words.

The gnome grumbled before standing up and leaning close to Anna. Luke watched as he put his gnarled little hand on her chest, just over her heart. She gasped and Luke lunged for the creature afraid for a moment it had hurt her. Then he saw it. The color began to flood back into her skin. She took a full breath and did not begin to cough. He could hear no rattle or wheeze as she drew in several more.

"My debt is paid." The gnome spoke to Tarris and ignored them. "You're a bigger fool than I've ever seen and you don't even have a wretched soul to blame for it. You'll regret this, incubus. But don't come to me when you do, for I'll just laugh in your face." The small creature was gone in an instant, leaving behind only two small indentations in the pillow where its tiny feet had stood.

\* \* \* \* \*

The air filled her lungs to capacity again and again without pain or triggering the hacking cough she'd lived with for over ten years now. She could no longer feel the pain in her shoulder and her hand flexed on the blankets without stiffness or pain. She looked up at Luke and smiled brightly.

"He healed me," her voice came out as a whisper.

*No, he did not, Tarris' hand gripped Luke's shoulder to keep him from grabbing her. He has merely masked the effects of your illness. It will last only until midnight and that's not as far off as you might think. You will begin to slip back to the way you were. Enough time to complete the mating, if you do not make too much of a production of things.* His hand moved from Luke's shoulder to lift his chin lovingly. *Claim your mate, my friend.* The kiss he placed on the upturned lips was hungry and fierce. The fingers tightened in Luke's hair tilting his head back. She watched the two men lean across her toward each other. An aching need starting to build inside her as the two beautiful males kissed, tongues visible as they caressed each other. Luke rose up on his knees and put an arm around Tarris' neck, pulling him down to sit on the edge of the bed. Tarris lowered himself next to her and allowed Luke to lean over him, forcing back his own neck. She watched,

breathing growing more rapid as Luke claimed the inside of Tarris' mouth. His hand sliding over the incubus' chest in a slow tender caress.

The kiss ended and the two sat still, foreheads pressed together, eyes closed. "Enjoy your rest, my dear one," Luke's voice whispered softly against Tarris' face. "Once we are mated, between the four of us in this house, you may never know rest again. You will certainly never know hunger."

*You always have to play the Dom.* The voice in her head was faintly amused as Tarris pulled away from Luke carefully. The eyes that met hers were sad but there was a hopeful touch to the smile on his lips. He leaned down and placed a chaste kiss on her lips. *Don't waste this time, Anna. Claim him.*

Tarris stood up. She expected him to blink out in a flash as he always did but instead he spun on his heel and walked out the door.

Luke moved to her side. "Midnight. Plenty of time I think."

"Plenty of time for a shower," she grinned. "The fey creature is right. You are rather icky."

"Icky?" Luke lifted an eyebrow before looking down at himself. A crease split his forehead. "Yeah, I am aren't I?"

Anna swung her legs off the bed and stood. Luke grabbed her elbow and held it. She took a step. Then another. And another. "The bathroom is where?"

He indicated a door on the same wall as the head of the bed. That would explain why she hadn't seen it. She smiled wickedly at the man who would soon be her mate. "Race ya." Still feeling odd on her legs, she darted toward the door. He clambered across the bed and met her in the doorway. His arms enfolded her as they backed into the bathroom laughing. His lips crushed themselves to hers as he pressed his body to the length of her. His kiss was powerful and demanding as he cupped one hand behind her head and used the other to start pulling up the nightshirt she had been loaned.

She grabbed the edges of his t-shirt and tugged it over his head. He left her lips only long enough to free himself from it and then returned to the plunder of her mouth. His

tongue danced with hers, dueling and teasing as his hands cupped her breasts. She gasped, her head flinging backward as his fingers pinched gently at her nipples, the hard peaks already swollen from need for his touch. His lips moved to her throat and he ran his tongue up the column of flesh making her shudder and shaking the hands that had been wrestling with his jeans. She tugged impatiently at the buttons and he laughed.

"Let me, I'd zap them out of the way but sometimes when I do that I can't find them again and I like this pair." He unfastened them and slipped them off his hips.

"You can do that?" She looked at him wide eyed.

"Annie, I'm feeling better and better about hunters. Of course I can, I can do a lot of things that are going to surprise you." He pulled his pants off and tossed them onto the growing pile. "Come here," he reached for her and she slithered away.

"No way, mister. Not until you're clean." She smiled mischievously at him and pulled open the shower stall door. "Good Lord!" she exclaimed. It was almost like walking into another room, albeit a very small one. There was plenty of room for more than one person, three or four actually. The white marble walls gleamed in the soft recessed light. Stepping inside she turned the gold faucet and adjusted the water. She heard the door close behind her. Luke waited while she found the right temperature then twisted the handle to turn on the shower.

Three showerheads sprayed out jets of delicious hot water to meet in the center where one buffeted Luke's back, one sprayed between them and the third pounded the skin of her neck. She watched him roll his neck and sigh. "That feels good."

She wriggled a bit under the spray letting the water strike the muscles and ease the ache. The stiffness and fatigue were gone. She shouldn't even be standing, let alone have the strength to go on from here. She picked up the large sponge from its shelf and poured out a generous amount of the soap on to it. Moving to Luke she washed his chest and shoulders, removing any traces of her blood. He closed his eyes and seemed to lose himself in the feel of her hands. Down his abdomen she moved with the thick

lathering suds. She rubbed circles on his skin with the sponge and traced shapes and patterns in the soap with her fingers.

Squeezing the suds into her hand she worked them into the nest of dark curls that surrounded the base of his shaft. Moving lower, deliberately avoiding contact with his cock, she caressed the soft tender sac. A low moan escaped his lips and his eyes remained closed. One hand reached out to brace itself against the wall. Sliding her hand up, she curled her fingers around the rigid length of him. She stroked the heavy thickness in her hand and felt herself growing wet as she imagined it buried deep inside her. She slid her hand over the sensitive head and back down to the base in a long measured rhythm. She could feel the throb that mirrored her own heartbeat echoed against her palm even as it pounded in the slick flesh between her legs.

She released him and stepped behind him. Her hands moved the soap over his broad shoulders and strong back. He was perfectly proportioned, her lover. Everything about him seemed as if it had been sculpted, carefully created by an artist's hand.

He turned and reached for her, pulling her against him. She felt her breasts press to his chest and slide across the slick soapy surface, as he moved. He swayed slightly, smiling down at her as if he knew exactly what he was doing. As if he knew exactly how delicious the torment of his flesh brushing against her hard nipples felt. His lips found hers and his tongue moved over the delicate skin of her inner lip before he closed it in his teeth and tugged. He pulled the sponge from her hand and stepped away from her.

The warm water slid over her while he used the soap-laden sponge to clean her back. As it moved down to her hips the pressure eased and its rough surface tickled her, making her squirm. Luke reached low and bathed each leg and foot before standing again. His body against her back, she could feel the hardness of him against her buttocks. He brought his hand and the sponge, dripping lather, around to her front. The feel of his chest against her back, his cock pressed against her as his hands massaged

her breasts, the texture of the sponge making her want to cry out. Soft gasps of pleasure escaped her even though she bit down on her lower lip.

The calloused tips of his fingers played with her left nipple, pinching slightly as he rubbed it between forefinger and thumb. The sponge moved lower over her stomach until he pushed it between her thighs. She opened willingly for him, taking almost as much joy in the fact that she stood there before him, whole and strong, as from the sensation of the slick sliding against her labia. She heard the soft splat as he dropped the sponge and his hand replaced it, stroking her folds. She leaned her head back against his shoulder and let the feelings in her body take over. Her dream lover was here in the flesh and his hands felt as good, no, better than they ever had.

"My Annie," he murmured in her ear. She felt him reach between them and start to stroke his cock against her.

She pulled away and put her hands on her hips playfully. "Lucas, you must finish your bath. You haven't been properly rinsed off, nor have I." The smile that tugged at her lips in equal parts for the teasing of her man as for the sensation of her breath coming rapidly but without the pain she had long grown used to.

"Rinsed," Luke's dark eyes suddenly shone with something that was exhilaratingly dangerous. "Rinsed. I see."

He moved toward her so quickly she cried out in alarm. He backed her into the wall of the shower near the central showerhead. He grabbed her hands and pinned them over her head. Her surprise gave way to a deep laugh. "Tarris is right. You always have to play the Dom."

The glint in the dark chocolate orbs grew even stronger. "I'll show you Dom." He leaned in and brushed his lips along her neck. The tingle ran all the way to her toes before rebounding upward and making her swollen flesh burn even more for his touch. "And I'll show you a few of those surprises."

Without a word or a hand gesture from him, she felt something cool encircle her wrists. Looking up she saw two gold cuffs that dangled at the end of golden chains



affixed to the wall. Her wrists lay cradled against a lining of soft cushioning fabric. Not uncomfortable but a tug at the chains soon revealed she was going nowhere. Before she could protest, he captured her mouth. His hands ran the length of her body, touching her, teasing her, arousing her to the point she was wriggling, rubbing her thighs together to ease the ache of want.

"You want Dom, my Annie, you got it."

Luke stepped back and let the water run over him. He rinsed the soap from his body. Standing there before her watchful gaze he moved his hand down to rinse the soap from the dark curls below his navel and then lower. Long fingers curled around his erection and slid over its length. He looked up and watched her face. She tried to meet his eyes but couldn't keep her gaze from the motion of his hand. She clenched her fist wanting to feel the hot flesh sliding along her palm. Her pussy reacted with a jolt when he started to move his hips to accentuate the motion of his hand. She wanted to feel those hips grind against her. She wanted him thrusting deep inside her, this time for real.

He stopped abruptly, his breathing ragged and labored. He leaned against the wall on his hands for just a moment before he reached up and lifted the showerhead from the wall. He adjusted the spray so that it was a pulsating jet and aimed it at her legs. "Rinsed, I think you said," his voice was low and seductive and her body shivered in response.

The feel of the water as it swept up and down her thighs was wonderful. It massaged as it moved over muscles that had been so long ignored and unused. After a brief shattering blast against the outer flesh of her mons he trailed the spray up her stomach. He avoided her breasts and let the water move between them, up to her shoulders and onto her neck. He moved in close and kissed her throat, his lips moving over the wet surface. As he did he lowered the showerhead and the spray fell against the swelling flesh of her breasts. The soft shuddering shivers that moved through her

made her so ready for him only the wetness of the shower could have hidden the dripping evidence of her arousal.

Still nuzzling her neck, he turned the jets on first one nipple then the other, rotating his hand so that the pulse blasted across the hard peak before veering off. Again and again, first one then the other, he tormented her this way for endless minutes. Easing away from her he claimed her tender nipple with his mouth and sucked at it.

He whispered against her, "I don't think you mind me playing Dom, do you?" She shook her head and moaned as he claimed the other with equal fervor. His tongue and teeth tortured her breasts with exquisite delights as she twisted and moaned. Her pussy had begun to ache so badly she was sure she'd die if he didn't fill her soon.

"Turn," he commanded with a soft pinch to one nipple. She found there was just enough give in the chains that held her to allow her to obey.

Luke pushed her thighs apart and she felt the blast of the water against her swollen lips. Her body screamed in pleasure and she was certain she was going to come then and there. He moved the spray back and forth over her outer folds. His hand was caressing her ass, his finger slipping down the crevice and stroking her. Luke pushed his knee between hers and lifted her leg up so her foot rested on the small ledge that ran the circumference of the shower. The shifting opened her lips and when the water again moved to the top of her slit it slammed her hardened clitoris. She cried out loudly and he pulled back on the spray, easing it back down her folds until it pounded against her buttocks.

Luke's hand spread her open and he aimed the jets of water into the crevice. The water pulsed against her anus and she groaned. His hand moved down to join the spray and he pressed his fingertip into the tight opening, slowly working it in, using the spray of the water to relax her and to ease his way. Never had anyone touched her ass or used it to heighten sexual pleasure. But the feel of his thick finger sliding into her was heavenly.

She began to groan loudly as he swept the water back up and circled her clitoris with the jets. Just barely letting them flicker against her, before he eased away. His finger moving in and out of her hole. The feel of the water teased her. She wanted release. She needed release.

"You like that?" he whispered into her ear.

"Yes, oh God yes, Luke." She pushed her hips back against him, driving his hand deeper. She cried out again as she felt a second finger join the penetration of her tightest opening.

"Just wait, my mate. When I again share you with Tarris, what pleasures we'll give you. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" He didn't wait for her to answer. "Both of us taking you, filling you. Does that sound good? Do you want it, my love?"

"Yes," the word erupted from her as both an answer and a plea.

She felt Luke pull out of her anus, then heard him drop the shower head and was certain she was about to feel the enormity of his cock spread her backside. But his thrust, when it came was into her pussy. She screamed his name and nearly came at that moment but he held still inside her as he pushed his thumb back up her ass. His movements were slow and deep, rocking her so her breasts bounced against the wall, the tender swollen nipples feeling the slap of the hard marble with each thrust. And he talked to her. Said things to her that made her weak. Whispers of what he wanted to do to her, of how he would please her in the lifetime before them.

"Come on Annie," his face pressed into the back of her neck. Luke did not hurry his thrusts but reached around to stroke her clit as he filled her. "Come for me. The first of many, my love. Come for me."

His words pushed her to a place where the world shuddered and tossed her off its edge. Her toes curled and her voice cried out. Her hands gripped the chains that held her as her release came.

She felt the restraints disappear and his arms catch her. He held her tight between his body and the wall, his strong arms around her. When her breathing slowed she looked up at him. "Are we mated?"

With a nod to the faucet, he shut the water off magically and grinned at her wickedly. "Not yet. We have to do this again, my love, holding the mating stone between our hands. But I wanted you this way first. I wanted to feel your body in the flesh before I bring us to release together."

He scooped her up and didn't bother to dry her. He carried her to the bed and laid her down. His mouth found the taut nipples and he laved them, licking each tenderly before sucking it into his mouth. His fingers moved down and drew circles around her clitoris, lazy, easy strokes to rebuild her arousal. He broke from teasing her breasts and reached for the red stone that he'd left on the bedside table. "I'll need to get this mounted. We normally do that before mating. After this it can't be cut or shaped so you'll have to keep it the shape it is."

She reached out and touched the stone. It was roughly heart-shaped and when she touched it a vibration burst through her that made her eyes fly open and her mouth form a surprised little O. Luke placed it in her left hand and pressed his hand to hers, tangling their fingers as they clutched it tightly between their palms. They both closed their eyes and gasped for breath. Anna could feel a pulsing through her body that pooled and focused in her warm needy pussy. Luke had been hard already but his length seemed to grow and stiffen even more. Opening her eyes she saw drips of sweat form on his brow that she was certain had no connection to the shower they'd just left.

He moved over her and the contact of his body along hers felt as if a dozen hands had begun to caress her. As much as she loved Luke's teasing foreplay, right now she just wanted him inside her. Before she could say the words, he ground his hips against hers and pushed his cock into her. Anna pulled her legs up and felt him sink even deeper into her body. The stone in their grasp seemed to be pushing her, driving her

toward orgasm as surely as the feel of her mate thrusting into her wetness again and again.

He whispered her name over and over as he buried his face in her neck. The world was disappearing around her as the pulsing in her clit swept over her entire body. She felt as if her breathing had stopped, it was unnecessary, unneeded in this shining golden world that was enveloping her and Luke. "I love you," she called against his shoulder as her fingers dug harshly into his back, wanting to pull him inside her completely.

"I love you," he groaned as she felt the entirety of existence explode around her and rush into her body filling her with glorious pleasure as she broke into innumerable pieces. Luke was with her. His body stiffening and a cry escaping him that sounded more like a growling roar. He opened his eyes and fixed them on hers and for that eternity, their bodies erupting with orgasm, she saw his spirit glowing in his eyes. She saw all the way to the center of who he was and the love that swelled inside her made the tears start to fall.

Slowly the force of the stone eased its hold on them and Anna once again felt her heart beat, felt her lungs take air. Luke collapsed on top of her, his breathing more ragged than hers had been during her days of illness and she was suddenly afraid. Afraid of what would happen if she lost him. Afraid of what it would mean to live without him.

Slowly he gathered his strength. He pushed up on one arm, the other's hand still clinging to hers and to the stone between them. He lifted that hand to his lips and kissed it. "Mine." He grinned with a weary playfulness.

"Always the Dom," she shook her head laughing.

He moved off her gingerly and stretched out beside her, pulling her across his chest. "But you are mine, Annie. My mate, my love. You are mine."

"You sound very much like a two-year-old," she teased. "Mine, mine, mine."

“You are mine,” he repeated unrepentantly and kissed the top of her head. “But don’t forget my dearest love, that I am also yours.”

Anna lifted her cheek from his chest and smiled into his eyes. “My mate, my love and my heart. Yes, Luke. You’re mine.”

His arm held her tightly. Her body ached with misuse. Muscles she’d forgotten she had screamed at the exertion to which they’d been subjected. And only the man in her arms felt better.

## **Epilogue**

"Luke," Sarah tapped on the door to the small sitting room and peeked in. "Luke, Mark needs you and Anna down at the carriage house." Her voice was tense and held clear evidence she was fighting back fear.

Luke looked quickly at Anna, her fingers toyed with the large stone hanging around her neck wrapped in a golden filigreed nest that held it safe. She rose with him and followed him out of the room. The morning after they mated, just a few days ago, Mark and Sarah had told them they would like them to stay at the house. Mark cited reasons of lineage. Luke was the next adult in line for his position. He would be regent and responsible for caring for Mark and Sarah's boys if anything happened to him. Sarah had spoken of family and of company, of wanting Luke and Anna to share with them and to raise their families together. Luke had accepted tentatively, leaving open the option for them to leave at some point. But Anna could easily see how much the offer had meant to him.

As they covered the distance between the main house and the carriage house, Luke checked his pace for her. She'd been crushed when her weakness had reclaimed her at midnight. But the mating was doing exactly what Luke said it would. It was healing her, strengthening her, just not as miraculously as Tarris' little friend. Tarris had been absent. Only Sarah had seen him in the last few days and she gave vague answers as to his whereabouts, saying only that he was helping some of the fey folk.

Luke opened the back door to the small cottage and led Anna inside. The tiny kitchen into which they stepped also seemed to double as an observation room. Video monitors and electronic consoles littered one half of the room while the other still seemed to have workable appliances. "It's the guard house," Luke explained as he closed the door.

Mark was sitting at the bank of monitors. He waved them over and pointed to the center screen. "Anna, do you know who that is?"

She peered at the image and gasped. "Jack?"

"What the hell is he doing here?" Luke asked.

"So he is your brother?" the dark eyes of the *Amar* fixed on Anna. She nodded.

"The hunter?" Again she nodded.

"The one who nearly killed you and tried to kill Tarris and Luke?"

She swallowed hard. "He didn't hurt me on purpose. But yes, that's my brother, Jack."

She saw the dark-haired man sitting in a straight-back chair before a small metal table in what looked like a scene straight out of a television police show. Two men she didn't know stood behind him obviously making sure he didn't move. He looked as if he'd put up a struggle. His face was bruising and a line of blood dripped from a cut on his cheek. A satchel sat on the table before him.

"Did you go after him?" the words came out of her throat in a croak. Luke's hand closed firmly on her upper arm in warning.

Mark frowned at her. "I'd have been perfectly within my rights if I had, Anna. Don't forget that. He threatened this family and I won't allow anyone to do that." She watched him shift his gaze to Luke. "As it is, he came to us. Rand and Levi found him on the grounds headed for the house." Mark stood and motioned for them to follow.

As she passed through the door Anna's heart sank. How could Jack have been so stupid? What was he doing coming here? Did he think he was rescuing her? She shook her head. No, more likely he was coming to kill her and probably at the order of the hunters.

Mark pushed open the door of the room she'd seen on the screen. When their eyes met, Jack started to stand but the larger of the two men pushed him back down. She could see his hands were cuffed behind his back. The bruising around his eye seemed



worse in person. His eyes widened in disbelief as they followed her. "You're walking, Anna? How?"

"Why are you here?" Mark ignored Jack's words and stood over him glaring menacingly. The man she'd seen at her bedside was back, replacing the one she'd watched the last few days chasing and cuddling two young boys and crawling about with them on his back. The day she'd walked in to find a large brown bear toting two small boys on his back to be tucked in, the reality of her new life had hit her hard. She'd asked Luke to show himself to her immediately after. He had, the worry etched across his face. She'd been delighted to find he could speak to her mind in the animal form and they lay on the rug before the hearth in their room with her head on his soft furred belly talking. He was gentler in this form than she'd ever seen him. Her bear reappeared over the next several days as if easing her into accepting him.

"I came for my sister," Jack shot back defiantly.

"Your sister is now my sister and my brother's mate. Somehow I doubt you came offering gifts in celebration of that fact." Mark looked at Luke who shook his head.

"No, I don't think he's going to be throwing us a reception any time soon." Luke's arm tightened around Anna and she could feel his attempt to reassure her. She also read it in Mark's words. He called her his sister, he was telling her she was part of the family and had gained, not just lost, by mating his brother.

"Jack," she stepped forward and looked down at him. "Why are you here?"

He glared at the men around him. "We need to talk in private, Anna."

She saw Luke look at Mark who nodded. A jerk of his head sent Rand and Levi out of the room. He withdrew himself to stand by the door. "This is as private as you get, hunter," Luke said as he sat down on the edge of the table.

"Why are you here," she repeated the words.

"You're walking. Anna I haven't seen you walking in so long..." his voice trailed off and she saw his eyes shine brightly.

"Mating with Luke is healing me, Jack." She rested her hip on the table next to her mate. "Why are you here?"

Jack sighed and his shoulders drooped. "I didn't come to hurt you. I just wanted to be sure you were all right. I knew if you weren't already dead, you would never come back."

"I'm fine, Jack."

"If you didn't come to hurt anyone, why were you so heavily armed?" Mark demanded from the shadows. "The satchel on the table holds weapons."

Anna turned and opened the bag. She started to sort through the items and felt the tears burn her eyes as they sprang free and rolled down her cheeks. Luke was at her side frowning. "Annie?"

"Let him go, Mark." Anna looked at the *Amar*.

"Let him go?" the leader of her mate's people looked at her as if she were mad. "He brought weapons into my home."

She lifted a framed photo of her family. Its silver frame had been replaced by a simple wooden one. "He brought no silver."

"Then he's a fool," Mark snorted.

"I brought my sister her things. She can't go back home, so I brought them to her." Jack's face spoke freely of his dislike of justifying himself before the Weres.

"Why can't she go home?" Luke's frown was frightening.

"Because they know. They had someone watching me on my first 'assignment'. They saw what happened. They heard it. The cage had a bug, a listening device built in so they could be sure I'd done my duty. They know." Jack's eyes threw the blame for the entire situation on Luke. "If you'd just left her alone she wouldn't have a price on her head."

Mark approached the table and he and Luke ignored the man as they looked at the contents of the bag. The photos, the small wooden box that held the trinkets of her

childhood. But at the bottom of the bag. Weapons. Her father's gun. Her father's arm bows.

"Why the weapons?" Mark asked her. "Why would he bring them?"

"Like he said," she answered softly. "They know. They know I've turned traitor and mated to a Were. I'm marked now. The bounty on my head will be higher than any but possibly yours. The *Amar* of the bears may command a higher reward than the traitorous daughter of a hunter. But my head will bring more personal satisfaction."

"You didn't think I'd leave you unable to protect yourself? You were a better mark with those bows than I ever was and you will be again with practice. The bolts are steel. The gun carries standard ammunition." Jack was watching her face carefully.

Anna turned from the table and walked to her brother. She put her arms around him and felt him rest his head against her as he whispered, "I love you, little sister." She kissed his cheek and brushed her hand down his face. He winced slightly as she came too close to the wound on his cheekbone.

"I love you, Anna. But make no mistake, I hate him." He jerked his head at Luke. "Healing or no, he's marked you for death and I hate him." His eyes went to Luke. "Her I protect, but you," his face twisted, "if you and I meet, I'll kill you."

"You can try," Luke said blandly.

Mark walked to the door and rapped on it sharply. When the two men came in he gestured to Jack. "Take him out beyond the gate and leave him. Don't hurt him unless he makes you. But if he ever comes here again, kill him."

Mark left and Luke's arm around her waist pulled her toward the door. Her eyes held Jack's until she was forced to turn.

"Anna," he called after her and she paused. "Dad knows."

She looked back over her shoulder and met the hazel eyes. "Good."

## **About the Author**

Elyssa Edwards' life has sometimes felt more like fiction than reality. She is currently living her own happily-ever-after with her darling one, whom she calls Precious, mostly because it causes a good deal of gnashing of teeth.

Elyssa welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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