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# The Protector's Keeper

By

Bonnie Rose Teigh

#### Dedication

Writing isn't just something I do, it completes me. I didn't realize I needed this creative outlet for fulfillment until my mate, Chris, suggested it. So Chris, thanks for understanding me in ways no one ever has. Julie, Beta Reader extraordinaire, thanks so much for all your help pulling this one together. I'm so glad you loved my wolves enough to volunteer to catch my booboos. So, I dedicate The Protector's Keeper to Chris and Julie. Without both of you supporting me, I wouldn't be able to produce the books that I have. Thanks for all you do. Finally, Bo thanks for the last minute read through to catch anything I might have missed. As always, any mistakes in this story are my own and I take full blame for them.

### Prologue

The thirteen-year-old girl huddled on one end of the couch, distraught, traumatized and lonelier than she'd ever been before.

It took her nearly a week of riding the bus to reach this hiding spot in New Jersey. A week of mind-numbing pain, exhaustion and despair. She couldn't leave the room she was hiding in because the killers who'd taken her family away could find her. But if she listened real hard, she could hear the ocean waves as they hit the shoreline.

Her brother loved to play at the beach whenever they stayed at the California compound. He'd missed all the fun this summer because he'd reached puberty and had to learn how to change into his wolf form and how to wield his powers.

Her mother and father would have sent her for training once she started going through puberty, too, but now they were gone and she didn't even have her brother Sam either. What would she do without him? He'd always been with her. He was her twin, a part of her, and now there was only a

hole where his voice and laughter used to be.

Samantha looked down at the journal she was clutching in her hands. They said she could leave a note for her brother in case he ever learned that she still lived. She wished she could just talk to him using her mind like she normally did, but the evil ones could find her that way. That was the last thing her mama had said before her death and she didn't want them to find her brother or her either. Leaving a note for him, hoping that one day he'd read it was the only thing she could do.

She stared at the paper, trying to think of the right words, but thinking only made it harder to fight the tears. So she'd write whatever came to mind.

The tears began to flow anyway as she wrote her heartfelt words to her only living relative.

> July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1985 Dear Sammy,

I hope one day you're reading this and aren't dead. Mom and Pops were driven off the road, but they were already dead. Vampires got them. A whole bunch. Mom and Pops thought that they were being followed during our trip back from the California house to our home in New Orleans.

We stayed at a motel one night and they left me there with food and supplies and enough money to get me here if something happened to them. They said they'd come back in two days and not to leave the room. Sammy, I knew when they died. Mama was talking to me. She told me where to go, how to get help. She said to run away as fast as I could. To get on a bus and not to talk to you. It's been a week, Sammy, and I miss you. I know when you try to talk and it's so hard not to answer you. To keep my mind empty like Mama said. They can find me that way. She said so.

The old people here are changing my name to Erica Samuels. That way you're always with me. I hope you find this and come find me when it's safe. They are sending me to Spain somewhere, where there is a family with a little girl. She's only 5, a baby still.

Come find me, Sam, please. If I don't see you in a couple of years, I guess maybe you might be dead, but I will keep hoping. I love you, Sammy.

Love, Sammie

Very gently, Samantha Woods closed the journal and placed it on the shelf where she'd found it. As she returned to the plush overstuffed couch to mourn, she kept repeating her new name to herself. "I'm Erica Samuels. I'm Erica Samuels. I'm Erica Samuels." She might have believed it if it weren't for her twin constantly calling to her through their familial telepathic link.

She continued to block him, staying silent despite her desire to reach out to him. It was the

only way to save him. He had to grow up to be the man she knew he was going to be. For amongst the usual gifts of one of her kind, she was also clairvoyant. It was just beginning to emerge, but she knew that one day Sam would be a very powerful man and that he'd help unite the Loupgarou again.

Hopefully, when it was safe again, he'd come and find her. Until that day, she'd be Erica Samuels and she'd protect her new little sister, Catalina. She'd keep her safe from the monsters, too.

## Chapter One

Twenty-three years later, Spain...

Jou're dead.

That's all the message written in blood said, but it struck a chord of fear in Catalina's heart. Who was the message meant for? Her or her sister, Erica? And why?

Streaks of blood dripped down her front door, pooling on the ground at her feet. Catalina Gasalla stared in horror at the crudely written words. Who would do such a thing? The blood was fresh. Whoever had done this must have left only moments before her arrival.

Where was Erica? She should have been at the airport to pick her up, but she'd never shown. This wasn't her sister's blood. She'd have recognized the scent if it was. Erica must have had a damn good reason to ditch her at the airport. Perhaps it was staring her right in the face.

Her thoughts jumped to Lobo-the wolf that

had adopted her several years back. He was her companion and usually traveled with her. However, it had been a last minute job offer and she hadn't had time to get the permits to bring him along. Was he all right? Catalina prayed it wasn't his blood. She'd have known if it was, wouldn't she? But Lobo wasn't here to greet her and that wasn't a good sign.

Why hadn't he put up a ruckus when she'd come home? After a three-month absence, he should have been waiting for her at the driveway, yipping in excitement while running in excited circles around her legs.

She wasn't about to open the door until she'd made sure Lobo and the rest of their livestock were alive and unharmed. She'd worry about the message after she'd checked the area to make sure no one was hiding nearby.

With her enhanced sense of hearing and smell she was certain no one was in the house, but the stables and training ring for the horses was a good five-minute hike. Owning several thousand acres could be a blessing, but in this case, it was more of a curse. Perhaps her sister was waiting for her there. She'd figure out what was going on and if her sister was missing, she'd find her. There were no two ways about it.

Her thoughts were muddled, her mind sluggish. She'd been traveling to reach home for

the last thirty-six hours, hadn't had a wink of sleep in her excitement to see her sister. She'd had to hop on a stranger's motorbike to get home and now this. God, was Erica all right? All her thoughts centered on her only family and her companion. They had to be okay. And if they weren't, by God, someone was going to pay.

The stables were empty, every horse stall bare. Except for one. In it, she discovered the remains of an old mare named Dolly, her sister's first horse and the one she valued most. Having seen seventeen seasons, she was just a pasture horse now. The sickly sweet smell of blood hung heavily in the air. If she hadn't been used to seeing a wolf bring down his prey, seen the devastation as they ate, she might have lost the contents of her stomach.

Claw marks scored the mare's belly, opening her for the world to see. Now Catalina knew where the blood had come from. Did they target this horse because it was her sister's or was it just a coincidence? It didn't matter really. She couldn't leave this for her sister to find. Catalina quickly went to work. Though a messy job, she could at least be thankful that using her Were strength she didn't need to ask for help from strangers when she buried the beloved animal under the shelter of a beech tree.

After a quick prayer that Dolly's spirit would

race to the heavens, Catalina turned and loped back to the house, careful to use the rear entrance so the evidence wouldn't be disturbed. She'd notify the police eventually, but she would hunt down the responsible creature and see he paid dearly for his actions.

Catalina knew the moment she entered her house that someone had thoroughly searched the place. It wasn't anything obvious, just that things were slightly off kilter, out of place, like the bowl of fruit pushed to the edge of the counter instead of centered.

His scent was everywhere. Cigarette smoke, sweat and Listerine. She'd be able to track him. More than likely, he'd had a car waiting and was long gone. In the living room, her Zoology books were out of order and the cushions from the sofa were all tossed in one corner of the couch instead of one at each end. It was just little things, but enough to tell her that someone had been in the house. And that really pissed her off.

Catalina went to her room first so she could drop off her backpack. She hadn't noticed anything out of place as her eyes first scanned the room. But after further inspection, rather than noticing an item missing, it was something added that finally caught her attention.

In the corner of her dresser mirror was a picture of her and her sister Erica, taken about three years earlier. Now why would Erica put a picture that's three years old there, she wondered.

Catalina remembered the day that picture had been taken. She and Erica had been discussing what they should do if one of them was ever in trouble. Back then, Catalina's idea was run like hell whereas Erica wanted to fight back in whatever way they could. Now though, Catalina was a grown-up woman who knew what it was like to survive in a world where it was hunt or be hunted.

With a sudden urge to hold the photo in her hand and maybe recapture a few more memories, Catalina pulled it off the mirror. She found a tiny slip of paper tucked in the corner of the mirror, hidden behind the picture. Only Erica would leave her a note this way.

Talk about hiding something in plain sight. Catalina had just reached for the slip of paper and palmed it when someone banged on her front door, startling her. It must be the luggage I asked to have delivered from the airport. What must they be thinking, seeing the message left there? She quickly retraced her steps before the delivery boy decided to take off with all of her clothes because she certainly didn't have time to track them down, not with what she'd found once she'd gotten home.

In all the mental scenarios she'd played out, she never would have guessed that the man she'd been hunting for the past three years would simply show up at her door. She quickly grabbed his hand and dragged him into the room before he could even open his mouth to protest. Not that he would have, but still. "It's about damn time you showed up," she said.

"Excuse me?" he asked.

"Do you know how long I've been hunting you? For three long years, I've known you were out there waiting for me, and when I finally come home to rest before looking for you again, you just show up at my door! What are the chances of that happening?"

"I hate to burst your bubble, but I would have come here whether you were here or not. I've come looking for your sister, to take her back home to her brother. He's never given up his belief that she was out there somewhere, alive, just waiting to be found."

"Oh, I see." Catalina couldn't believe it. She'd searched for her mate for years, sensing him out there, but unable to find him, always searching yet coming away disappointed. What were the odds of him showing up at her door unannounced? She tucked her hands in her pants pocket to keep him from seeing them shake while she waited for an explanation of his visit.

"I'm Sebastian Malone. Sam was staying with us when his parents were killed and his sister, Samantha, went missing twenty-three years ago."
"Sam Woods?"

"So you know who your sister really is then?" he asked, already seeming to know the answer.

"Of course, we don't have any secrets from each other." When he just lifted an eyebrow at her, she amended her statement. "Well, at least not very many." Catalina licked her lips, her panicked mind just now noticing how gorgeous this man was. He was huge across the shoulders and his muscles rippled beneath his gray T-shirt every time he moved. Her pulse quickened and her hormones went into overdrive.

His hair was as wavy as hers was straight and a hundred different shades of blond. He had an inherent strength in his face, kindled with a sort of passionate beauty—an arresting combination. His eyes though made her breath catch, her palms sweat and her heart pound out a frantic rhythm. They were a deep, dark, sapphire blue and they were focused solely on her.

His stance emphasized the force of his thighs and the strength of his hips. And he was tall. At least a couple inches over six feet. She'd always dreamed her mate would be able to swing her over his shoulder and stalk away with her like a caveman, ready to ravish her at any time. This man in front of her could have walked right out of her fantasies. How did she get so lucky? She

couldn't wait to find out more about the man Fate had chosen for her.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian was stunned. He'd known that this mission would lead him to his mate, but he hadn't expected that it would happen in less than a day after arriving in Spain. But here she was, standing in front of him and it was nearly impossible to stay focused on his need to find Samantha. Of course finding her was one of the reasons he'd volunteered for this mission so at least he wasn't that off-track.

God, she was gorgeous. Her golden blonde hair hung past her waist and fell down her back in one long braid. Her heart-shaped face and delicate nose and her temptingly curved mouth gave him the impression of a woodland sprite. Her seagreen eyes and lush figure just added to her overall beauty.

But there was strength in her, too, that didn't lessen the femininity she possessed. Her height, maybe six inches shorter than his six-foot-three frame, was definitely not sprite material, maybe Amazon Warrior. He could see that she had developed a strength and stamina at odds with her gentle beauty. It captivated him.

She was one very desirable woman and she was

all his for the rest of their lives. He wanted to shout with joy, to hug the life out of her and he wanted to just walk up to her and sweep her off her feet.

Finally, he found his voice again. "What the hell is with the message on the front door and where is Samantha, I mean Erica? After a thorough investigation by our PI we tracked her to this location."

"What took you so long to come for her?"

"The underground she traveled through was unknown to us until a couple of months ago. Then we started reading journal entries to track down all of our people to unite into a solid society again. I happened to run across her journal entry and felt that I had to make this trip. I knew if I went to look for Erica, then I'd also find my mate. I was certain of it."

"Well," she huffed. "I would have found you eventually."

"Now tell me about the blood," he demanded.

"I came home from Yellowstone this morning, not two hours ago and found it. You know as much about it as I do now."

Looking at her rigid shoulders and her belligerent attitude, he realized he'd somehow offended her. Before he could apologize for whatever he'd said to set her off, she added something that just couldn't be true.

"Erica is missing."

He couldn't wait to spend time with her. Find out how her mind worked, get to know her and eventually get horizontal with her. But her final statement stopped his imagination cold. Hell, if Sam were here right now, he'd be crushed. And more determined than ever to find her and bring her home. "What do you mean she's missing?"

"Exactly that, she left me a clue, but you interrupted before I could read it."

That's when he noticed the tiny square of paper resting in her open palm. "Well, don't you think you should read it?"

"Maybe you should know what happened before I found the note. Someone was in here, moved things around and didn't put them back exactly right. You know, little things that someone else would hardly notice." Sebastian nodded and Catalina continued. "Then I go into my room to drop my backpack and I find a three-year-old picture stuck in the corner of my mirror and this piece of paper tucked behind it."

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

"The truth?"

"Of course." Like she could lie to him and get away with it. They were mates, unable to tell a lie without their emotions giving them away. Once they were bonded by the ritual words, they'd know each other's thoughts, too. "Because I can't seem to think beyond anything but ripping your clothes off, jumping your bones and wallowing in the afterglow. Then starting all over again."

Sebastian didn't know what to say since he'd been having similar thoughts just moments earlier. "Catalina, I'm going to take you up on that, I really am, just not until we know what's going on."

\* \* \* \*

Catalina nodded knowing he was right. Samantha—she needed to get used to calling her that—could be in danger. It was time to focus on her big sister. The bone jumping could wait until they had a handle on things and got to know each other.

She wasn't a girl who hopped into bed with a man the moment she met him. In fact, she hadn't hopped into bed with anyone. Ever. She'd been waiting for her mate. It was her gift to him, to let him know she'd never been unfaithful to him. From the moment Samantha had told her that her mate was out there, in need of her, she knew that he would be the only man she'd ever let near her in that way. With Sebastian looking on, Catalina moved over to the couch and slowly unfolded the note.

"Well, what does it say?" he asked impatiently.

"That's it? What secret place?"

"It's where we used to leave notes to each other about plans we didn't want our mother to know about."

"Let's go look."

She turned toward Sebastian, sudden anger overwhelming her. Catalina's fury almost choked her. "This is my sister we're talking about. I won't take orders from you any more than I'd take them from anyone else."

"It wasn't meant as an order, Cat."

"Cat?"

Sebastian shrugged and smiled. "For an instant you looked like a spitting cat, besides Cats are striking animals, graceful, agile, beautiful. The name suits you." Before she could comment on his nickname, he continued. "I would like to join you is all. You don't have to be so damn touchy about things. When I give you an order you'll know it and I'll expect you to follow it."

Catalina snorted, "Like that's ever gonna happen, big guy." She stood and, closing in on her man, reached up and tugged his head down. Licking his lips with her tongue, she demanded entry. Her mouth was on fire, tastes and textures blended. She could have been eating chocolate mousse and it wouldn't have tasted as good as her

<sup>&</sup>quot;All it says is look in our secret place."

mate did.

She slowly pulled away, though it was the hardest thing she'd ever had to do. "I just thought I'd get that out of the way before thinking about it drove me around the bend," she admitted.

"Hmmm..." he murmured. "Let's try that again." He pulled her back into his arms, lifting her body so that she either hung suspended above the floor or wrapped her legs around his waist.

Of course, she wrapped her legs around the man. What sane woman wouldn't? Oh God, if she'd felt hot with the first kiss, this one was a raging forest fire. It burned out of control.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian couldn't believe the passion locked up inside his woman. He was having a difficult time not grinding his cock against her pussy. It was going to kill him if he didn't end this kiss. It would kill him if he did.

Finally, coming to his senses, he gently pried her legs from around his waist and lowered her to the floor. When they finally did make it to bed, he was sure they would spontaneously combust. He took a couple of steps back and, once he caught his breath, asked, "So where are we going?"

"Out to the stables where we keep the horses. By the way, did you happen to see a wolf when you came to the door?"

"If you mean the grey wolf that sniffed me, bowed his head and trotted off, then I'd say yes."

Catalina let out a huge sigh of relief, gathered her wits and led the way to the French doors off the dining room. This time she managed not to drag Sebastian by the hand, though she itched to get her hands on him again. She led him to the rear of the house where he could see a huge stable and a training ring.

"You train horses?"

"Just our own usually, but when money is tight Samantha or I will take a job. We could do it more often and make a steady income, but it isn't our passion."

"So what are you both doing to make a living?"

"Samantha is a wildlife photographer. She works a lot for magazines and such. And me, well I'm a Zoologist. About half the time, I spend in the field and looking for you and the other half I end up working as a Zookeeper until I have enough funds saved to hunt for you again. But honestly, I'd rather work in the field, studying migrating wolves, their reintroduction to places like Arizona and Yellowstone National Park. In the past, I traveled to Alaska or Canada to do my research. Canada just seems to always call to me if I've been away too long. At times if felt more like home than when I traveled back here to Spain where I've

lived most of my life."

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian tensed. His shoulders stiffened. His back went poker straight. Then he relaxed his stance.

"There's a tack room in the back with a trap door underneath," she told him. "It leads to a hidden chamber deep underground."

"When did this get built?" he asked, not realizing he'd spoken his thoughts aloud.

"My parents had the stables built and the underground chamber constructed before they'd even finished the house. They wanted to make sure we had a back door if one was ever needed."

"So it has another exit?"

"Yes, another tunnel leads about a quarter of a mile into those trees you see in the distance. Once there, we were to shift and run like hell. I imagine that's the way Samantha went when she left."

"When was the last time you spoke with her?" He knew he was putting her through hell with his questions, but they had to be asked.

"Last night, I was giving her my flight itinerary."

"So we know she was here last night."

"Yes, but she said she'd picked up an assignment for last night, filling in for a photographer at a crime scene in Calatayud."

"You think she saw something? Would she have taken photos of the people in the crowd?"

"Sure she would. It's procedure. She told me once that sometimes criminals liked to hang around the scene of the crime and watch the police go through their routine. It's like an adrenaline high for them."

After a moment, she caught on to what he was asking. "You don't think..."

# Chapter Two

Let's get to that chamber, then we'll know something for sure and we can go from there."

They entered the tack room together, aware that someone was likely after Samantha and could return at any moment. The trap door was hidden quite effectively. It was set into the wood flooring. Each piece appeared to be nailed into the floor, but a small section lifted straight up and out.

Catalina had just exposed the opening that looked down into complete darkness when Lobo bounded into the room. "If he wants to come, let him. He knows when I need him and always comes when danger's near. We need to get out of here. Now."

Just as he was about to follow them down through the opening, Lobo suddenly spun with a deep growl and raced back out of the room. Catalina and Sebastian exchanged worried glances and waited. No way would she leave him behind. The wolf backed into the room a couple minutes later carrying her backpack between his teeth.

Lobo must have gone into the house through the opening in the door she'd had fitted for him. Trouble was definitely coming if he'd brought her field equipment to her.

She quickly dropped into the hole while Sebastian took the bag from her wolf and followed her into the dark pit. Lobo jumped in right behind Sebastian after grabbing the trap door with his teeth and tugging it closed behind him.

\* \* \* \*

"Damn it," Sebastian cursed. He had almost forgotten to cover their escape. It took his wolf brethren to catch his mistake. "Thanks, Lobo," he whispered. "I've got it now. You catch up with, Cat."

Climbing up the ladder, Sebastian finished sealing them into the tunnel. He was climbing back down when he heard footsteps overhead. From the sounds of it, several people were hunting them.

He quickly caught up with Cat. His eyesight functioned as well in the dark as it did during the light of the day. Knowing that others were above them, he chose to speak to her telepathically as mates were able to do. It would only add to the bond already forming between them. Whoever was here earlier is right behind us.

\* \* \* \*

It startled Catalina to hear Sebastian's voice whisper through her mind. It seemed strangely intimate and entirely right. I hear them. They might find the door so we need to hurry and find whatever Samantha left for me. It should tell us something and then we'll get the hell out of Dodge.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian mentally nodded as they walked through the corridor. Within minutes, they ran into a solid wall of tumbled rocks and rafters. Catalina ran her hands along the debris and an opening appeared before them.

The cavern ahead was huge. In fact, it looked like a log cabin inside. The walls were made of cedar logs and the floors were even carpeted. A set of bunk beds and a queen size bed were on one side of the room, separated by a curtain. A half wall separated the sleeping area from the rest of the living space including a kitchenette, small bathroom, and living room. Overflowing bookshelves covered an entire wall. Catalina headed straight for them.

"This is where your parents lived before they built the house?" he asked, already knowing the answer, but wanting to hear her low, silvery voice. A voice that sent tingles down his spine and stirred the hairs at the nape of his neck. He was in lust with that tone she used.

"Yes, we used to camp in here sometimes when my father sensed vampires in the area. He was a great hunter, but he wasn't quite great enough. He died thirteen years ago fighting a vampire that had invaded our land and my mother died less than six months later. It was as if she had just given up without him. To have a love so fulfilling that even in death you must be together seems magical to me."

Sebastian watched as Samantha walked over to the bookshelves, ran her hand lovingly over the spines of the books coated with dust. He wanted to feel her hands on his flesh, but instead focused on what she was saying rather than imagining the touch of her skin against his.

"Samantha has raised me on her own since she turned twenty-one. She couldn't have been a better mother or sister to me. I owe her so much. I will find her. I just hope it's before whoever's chasing her catches up with her."

"Have faith, and it's we. We will find her. You're not alone anymore. Or have you already forgotten that fact?"

"It will just take some time getting used to," she muttered hastily. Catalina started pawing through the books on one of the bookshelves, Lobo standing like a sentinel at her side. The wolf understood that he was no longer the alpha male, but it didn't seem to bother him as if he'd been protecting Catalina only until her mate arrived.

Sebastian wondered if the wolf would stick around now that her mate had indeed come to her. He figured Lobo would stay until he found a mate of his own and even then would stick close to Cat. He was part of her pack just as she was a part of Sebastian's pack now.

Within a few moments, Catalina was walking toward him, holding a manila envelope in her hand. "This is what she left for us, but I suggest we get out of here and to safety before we take the time to look through it."

"Good idea. We probably should put it in the backpack. We'll shift after we place our clothes in it and I'll carry it until we're a good distance away."

Seeing Catalina's unease flash across her face at the thought of stripping in front of him, Sebastian smiled at her, winked and turned his back while she prepared to shift.

God, he couldn't wait until they had the time to explore each other's bodies. In the tank top and shorts she wore, he could tell she was well toned, sleek like the jungle cats he'd alluded to with her nickname. Even her toes looked sexy in the leather sandals she'd been wearing.

Maybe he could accidentally turn around before she finished stripping. No, he couldn't do that to her. She was nervous enough about shifting in front of him. He could hear her clothes rustle as they slid from her body. His imagination was in overdrive. Was she wearing lacy panties or a thong, or perhaps nothing at all?

No, he couldn't be that fortunate. She'd wear some sort of under things. He just couldn't wait to find out if she preferred cotton over satin or lace. And what kind of thoughts were these to have when an animal had been slaughtered, blood messages written on a door and a person missing? Get your priorities straight, he told himself.

\* \* \* \*

Catalina swallowed the knot of fear in the back of her throat. She'd never been naked in front of a man before. It didn't matter that this man was her mate and he had every right to see her naked just as she had the same rights.

She quickly shoved her clothes into her field pack, looking over her shoulder to make sure Sebastian wasn't peeking. She felt so exposed. Was it because she was still a virgin? Or maybe because

she knew that this man's opinion of her body was very important to her.

Picturing her wolf form in her mind, Catalina felt the change take over. It always started first in her spine, the bending of it, forcing her to drop down to all fours. Then her arms and legs began to change, to reform, growing thicker, more muscular. Her muscles stretched and stretched until the pain was almost unbearable.

Where first she had hands and feet, she now had paws with vicious-looking claws where her fingernails should be. Fur almost as blonde as her hair raced over her, covering every inch of her exposed skin. Finally, she felt the bones in her face change. Her nose became a muzzle and her mouth were now jaws, strong enough to snap bone if she had to.

\* \* \* \*

Her voice, husky and a little shaky, floated through his mind. *It's all clear*.

Sebastian started stripping where he stood, knowing full well she hadn't turned her back yet. She was either frozen in shock because he hadn't warned her or was appreciating the view. He rather hoped it was the latter.

As soon as he was naked, Sebastian turned around to stuff his clothes in her pack, giving her a

full view of his erection. Her scent alone could get him hard. Add his imagination running wild while she'd been stripping and he was a goner. There was no way for his body to ignore her closeness.

Their species was highly sexual, and when it came to their mates, they couldn't seem to keep their hands to themselves for long. It was better that she started getting used to his body now before they reached the stage where they would be making love.

\* \* \* \*

Catalina was speechless. She thought he was good looking fully dressed, but nude he was a work of art. His abs were more like a twelve-pack rather than the six-pack she'd previously expected, and to put it bluntly, the man was hung like a horse. All of a sudden, she was terrified. How in the hell was he going to fit inside her?

Before she could turn her back, he quickly changed. After a moment of disorientation, he walked over to her, swiped his tongue across her muzzle and rubbed his head against hers, offering what comfort he could. After opening the door behind the bookcase, Catalina gathered the evidence her sister had left behind. He silently picked up the pack in his teeth and followed

Catalina out the door. The three wolves raced through the quarter mile tunnel, toward the woods at the rear of her property. Hopefully, no one would be searching the woods for them yet. She felt Sebastian's presence drifting through her mind before he spoke.

Let's hope the men in the stables don't know that anyone has been there since they last searched the place. Samantha must have sensed them coming because of her gift of clairvoyance and headed for the hills.

Where are you staying? We need somewhere to go.

I was planning to stay on my jet. It's at the airport in Zaragoza.

Okay, she agreed. Once we're off the property, there should be a couple of vehicles in a garage not far from here. Samantha and I bought them about five years ago in case we ever had to use the escape route. There should still be one left there for me to use. Then we'll head straight for the airport and hop on your jet. She could actually hear Sebastian nodding inside her head and it made her smile. This was so cool.

Once we get on the plane, I'll fly us out of Spain, circling the air if I have to, until you go through what your sister left for you.

Sounds like a good idea to me, she agreed.

The trio ran the miles between the house and the garage in record time, with the two werewolves shifting back into human form on the run, ignoring their nakedness in their need to access the closed garage door. Once inside, Sebastian dropped the pack on the floor and Catalina and he quickly dressed. He held the rear passenger door open long enough for Lobo to join them and then hopped into the driver's seat of the plain sedan. They headed to the Zaragoza airport, meandering along with the rest of the traffic heading into the city. An hour later they pulled through security and onto the tarmac where the jet was parked. On a positive note, she thought, her luggage was probably still at the airport waiting to be delivered. Wherever they'd have to go to find her sister, she should have plenty of clothes to wear.

Catalina looked at the plane as they approached it. Almost as large as a commercial airliner, she wondered if it could be a corporate jet. Who in the hell cares, it was a beautiful piece of machinery. She couldn't wait to see the inside. Was it as luxurious and sleek as it looked?

Sebastian led the way up the steps, opened the hatch and headed inside. Lobo was next, rushing up the stairs, anxious for a plane ride. He was the only non-domesticated animal she knew who looked forward to his trips through the air. Maybe in a former life he was a bird. Catalina shrugged. She was just glad that he'd insisted on coming along.

Catalina finally started up the steps, in awe at the obvious wealth this plane represented. "Here's a stupid question, Sebastian," she said, following him into the cockpit before she explored the rest of the interior. "Are you just well off or are you filthy rich?"

"Does it make a difference?" he asked, his lips twisting into a cynical smile.

"How can you ask me that?" She glared at him with burning reproachful eyes.

"It was just a question. Let's just say I was curious if wealth mattered to you or not. Would you think of me differently if I was poor?"

His voice was bland as though the answer didn't matter one wit, but she could feel his emotions, an underlying hurt beneath his words. He asked the questions with the certainty of a man who knew he would never be satisfied with only a dream. He wanted their bond based on love and respect, not greed.

She could hardly lift her voice above a whisper, feeling ashamed that the question of his wealth had even crossed her mind. "I wouldn't care if you didn't have a dime to your name. You're still a part of me, a part of my soul. All I can do is apologize for offending you. I am truly sorry."

His voice when he spoke again was warm, "I guess I already knew that, but I had to hear the words for myself. I hope you can understand. I want us to have a true partnership. What's mine is yours and what's yours is mine, including the love

I know I'll feel for you. I need to share my life with you and I'm hoping you'll feel the same way."

She merely stared, tongue-tied. "I feel the exact same way," she said in a tear-thickened whisper. She couldn't let him see her cry at the beauty of his words. He was her dream man. The one perfectly suited to match her in every way. She quietly backed out of the cockpit and headed toward the rear of the plane. Luxury didn't even begin to describe this aircraft.

Leather recliners lined both of the walls, leaving a sitting area with a couple of loveseats in the middle of the aisle, which still left plenty of room to get by. About halfway down the plane, the entire section was walled off with a single door that allowed entry into the rear of the plane. I wonder what's behind the closed door, she thought, her curiosity getting the better of her. "Is this an office back here?" she yelled over her shoulder.

He chuckled. "Not exactly," he replied, laughter evident in his voice.

Before he could warn her, she stepped into a luxurious bedchamber. A four-poster bed had been bolted down in the center of the room, with carvings of mating wolves on the headboard. The footboard had scenes of a pair of wolves frolicking in a forest. It felt like she could step right into the image.

Off to one side was another door she assumed was the bathroom, but she stood motionless, transfixed with the bed. She'd had dreams about a bed that looked exactly like this one.

The duvet was the same striking blue that she remembered and the nightstands were made of the same cherry wood as the bed. Had it been her abilities that had conjured up these images in her mind? Or had she had help from Samantha, a hint of what to expect that would identify her mate if she hadn't recognized him?

It was probably the latter because clairvoyance was not her special ability. Her ability was reading other people's thoughts, their desires and their perversions. No one could block her if she wanted to pluck something from their minds while hers was impenetrable unless she chose to drop her guards.

The temptation of knowing this bedroom was here was going to drive her crazy. She could barely keep her hands off her studly man as it was and this discovery wasn't going to help the situation any. Catalina backed out of the room and smacked right into Sebastian standing behind her. She hadn't even known he was there.

"I wanted to make sure you didn't get the wrong impression. I travel for Sam a lot and this is where I stay, this is my bed. I had it designed for my mate about three years ago. I keep it where I am, whether it's on the plane or in my own home. It's the one possession of mine I am compelled to keep with me at all times."

Catalina swallowed the hope rising in her heart. She wanted to leap into his arms and christen the damn thing. But he was still talking and they still had to go through the manila envelope.

"I've never slept with a woman in this bed and I've been celibate for a very long time. From the moment I knew you were out there, I've had no desire to be with anyone else."

She stared at him dumfounded. How was she supposed to tell him she had zero experience in this area? "I've never been with anyone," she boldly admitted. "You're the only man I'll give myself to, heart and soul, the only one who will ever share my bed, my body."

\* \* \* \*

Now Sebastian was shocked. Dear God, how could he go slowly their first time when already, just standing in the room with her, he wanted to nail her against the nearest surface, be it vertical or horizontal? The fact that she'd saved herself for him mattered deep in his soul. "We'll go real slow the first time and I'll show you everything you need to know when the time comes. Okay? No more worries?"

She just shook her head, then squeezed past him to the safety of the main area of the plane, grabbing her field pack along the way, and settled into one of the recliners.

\* \* \* \*

She was reaching for the envelope when she remembered her lack of clothing. "I almost forgot. My luggage is still here at the airport. Could you have it sent on board while we wait to get clearance to take off?" she asked.

"Sure, I'll radio baggage claims. Do you want me with you while you go through the papers your sister left you?"

"I'd love for you to, but I need you to get us out of here. I don't want anyone catching up with us until we know what in the hell is going on."

Sebastian nodded and headed back toward the cockpit. Knowing this would be tough on her, Lobo got up from where he'd been lying on the sofa and curled up in the chair next to hers, well within petting reach if she needed it.

She shook the envelope and a piece of notebook paper fell to the floor. She opened the paper and noted the messy, obviously hurriedly-written handwriting.

Dearest Lina,

Oh, baby, I miss you terribly already. You must have been shocked to learn that I had disappeared overnight. But I must ask you to do something for me.

You must find my brother, Samuel Woods. He should be the leader of all Loup-garou by now and living on a mountain in Upstate, New York. I've known that had been his destiny since we were children.

Have him take you to Canada to a man you must meet. I've influenced you to go there many times and still you haven't found him. I imagine he'll find you first. Still you must get these photos to Sam. They are the only evidence of a conspiracy he must know about.

Have him look at the pictures of the crowd. I'm sure he'll find the connection as easily as I did. I'll be calling you on your satellite phone.

If you don't hear from me, then you know I'm in trouble. I'm going to Switzerland first. I'll call you every Sunday with my general location, in case they somehow get a tap on my phone or pinpoint me some other way. I'll be jumping around different countries, constantly on the move until I can make my way to my brother's place in New York.

I love you, Lina, and I know this man will make you happy. Just give him a chance. And you're going to have a ton of kids. I'll always love you, little sister.

Love, Samantha

Catalina chuckled when she read that part because her sister knew exactly how terrified she was of childbirth. But with Sebastian, she'd have as many of his children as they could handle. Joy of knowing that she'd have a family of her own replaced her fear.

After folding the note, she started going through the photos, finding nothing that caught her attention. Maybe Sebastian would see something that she hadn't. She would meet a new brother who just happened to be the leader of all Loup-garou. She just hoped Samantha stayed miles ahead of whoever was after her.

\* \* \* \*

No sooner had she brushed the tears from her eyes than Sebastian was by her side. "Do you want to talk about it?" He knelt at her feet, running his palms up and down her thighs, needing to touch her, to reassure her that everything would turn out all right.

"It's so sad. I have a feeling she's not expecting to survive this experience. She's clairvoyant. If she saw her own death, she'd make sure I was taken care of before allowing destiny to catch up with her."

"Oh, baby, please don't cry. We'll find her together. It'll just take a little time is all."

"I'm so afraid I'll never see her again."

"What name is she traveling under? Do you know?"

She laughed and then hiccupped before answering, "She signed the letter *Love*, *Samantha*."

"She's using her real name as her alias?" he repeated, needing to make sure that's what she meant. "Is she trying to get caught?"

"Probably, eventually. When she knows I'll be taken care of, I imagine she will."

"Then we're heading for New York. I'll take you to Sam and then to my PI friend, my best friend actually. He lives in New Jersey. He'll help us track your sister after we get that first phone call."

\* \* \* \*

Catalina nodded, handed the stack of photos to Sebastian and then leaned her head back in the chair. Maybe if she closed her eyes for a moment, she'd feel better, be able to concentrate again.

## The Protector's Keeper

She never realized when she slipped into sleep or noticed when Sebastian picked her up and carried her into their bedroom. He stripped off her shoes, but left the rest of her clothing on and quietly left the room.

## Chapter Three

They arrived in New York early the next afternoon, having spent the night in London after refueling. Catalina had slept the night through, unaware that she was lying in their bed alone.

Sebastian bunked down on one of the sofas with Lobo lying at his feet. It appeared as though the wolf had decided that he wanted to stay a part of Sebastian's pack, after all.

Now they were in Sebastian's rental car heading toward the Adirondack Mountains in Upstate, New York. Catalina fidgeted in her seat. "Don't worry, honey, Sam will love you. You're his sister through both Samantha and me. Relax," he said, sliding one work-roughened hand over her clenched fingers, while keeping his other hand on the steering wheel.

It took only a couple hours to drive up from Albany International Airport and they were closing in on Sam and Elizabeth's home. They'd be there in less than ten minutes.

After a few moments, Sebastian began to speak, "I thought I'd prepare you. Elizabeth—that's Sam's wife- just had twins about three months ago. It took us nearly four months to track Erica Samuels down. I started by following her credit card receipts, but always showed up right after she'd left the location. So a few days ago, we decided I would just wait until she flew back to Spain instead of rushing around the world trying to catch up with her. What I'm trying to say," he continued, "is Sam's a bit on edge. He's wanted his sister back for over twenty years. Expect many questions about her life and her childhood. Any little scrap of information would soothe him until we can bring her home. You're his only link to her right now."

"I understand. I've been thinking about that the whole way here. He's going to be in so much pain knowing I grew up with her and he didn't. I feel so badly for him. What if he hates me because of it? How would I cope knowing that he felt that way about me? He's your brother, the same as Samantha is my sister."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he stated confidently. "If I had to choose between my brotherly relationship with Sam and our life together, I'd choose you every time. But Sam will love you, just you wait and see." They rounded a

bend and Sebastian sighed in relief. Being this close to his mate, trapped in the small confines of the car and unable to touch her as he wanted had about driven him crazy. "We're here."

\* \* \* \*

Icy fear twisted around her heart, but she wouldn't show it, getting out of the car as casually as she could manage. A man and a woman, each of them holding a baby, stood on the front porch waiting for them. Sebastian took her hand and led her to the small group waiting patiently for them to approach.

The man handed his child to the woman, then quickly hopped off the porch and swept Catalina off her feet and into his arms, giving her a tight squeeze in the process. Catalina laughed, relieved and a bit surprised by the affectionate hug. Sam's joy was obviously genuine and she regretted all the fears that had kept her from enjoying the scenic ride up the mountain.

Sam finally let her down and kept his arm on her shoulder as he held out his hand to Sebastian. They clasped each other's forearms. "Congratulations, my friend on finding your mate and bringing her to meet her family." Sam turned to Catalina. "Welcome, little sister. Now tell me," he said as he gently guided her up the porch stairs

and into the house, "how was the flight?"

"To be honest, I don't remember much of it. I was only awake the last couple of hours. I slept right through most of it, including Sebastian carting me off to bed and leaving me tucked under the covers. Even my wolf abandoned me to sleep by Sebastian's side."

"The nerve of him," Beth said. "What wolf?"

"Oh, we let him out about a mile back because he was howling like there was no tomorrow. He'll find his way here when he's ready. I don't keep him as a pet. He has always come and gone on his own. He's probably out hunting for his supper right now."

"Well, he's welcome here. All members of your family are welcome here, including your wolf. What's his name by the way?" Sam asked.

"Lobo, and I'm afraid it's just me and Samantha now. Both my parents have passed away."

Beth led the way into the living room, carrying both babies.

Catalina's curiosity got the better of her again and she had to know. "What are their names?" She had always wanted babies of her own—despite her fear that something would go wrong during the pregnancy. Her mom had several miscarriages before finally having her and she feared she'd have the same problem if she ever did conceive. Despite her fear, she was a little

envious of Beth's good fortune.

"The one sucking his thumb is William and the other one who's sound asleep for a change, is Matthew," Sebastian said from behind her.

He'd snuck up so quietly that she let out a squeak. Sebastian laughed, enjoying the moment. It wasn't easy to catch Cat unawares, but he enjoyed trying.

So engrossed with the babies, Catalina didn't notice the other occupants in the room until a little girl ran up to her.

"Hi, I'm Amy. Are you going to be my aunt?"

How precocious and cute, were Catalina's first thoughts. How to answer her? "I think so. Would you like to have a new aunt?"

The little girl thought about it for a moment, her brows scrunched up and her lips pinched together. "Will you bring me presents on my birthday and on Christmas?"

Catalina couldn't help it, she laughed. "Only if you tell me your full name."

"Oh, I forgot. I'm Amy Malone and that's my mom and dad over there," she said, pointing over her shoulder at the couple looking at them with bemused smiles.

"And how old are you?" Catalina asked, amused by the little girl.

"I'm nine," she said, proudly.

"Are all nine years old as smart as you?"

Catalina said, pretending to whisper, aware that everyone could hear the questions and answers exchanged.

"'Cause I am awful smart. My mother and father told me so."

Catalina stood as the couple approached her. How could you not tell me your brother and his family were going to be here, Sebastian.

Honey, if I'd known I would have told you. Think of it this way, you're getting to meet most of my family all at once

Catalina looked at him sharply. *That is not at all funny*. But he did have a point and they didn't look like they disapproved of her.

They are going to love you. Now stop being silly and meet my family.

Once again, she was swept up into strong arms. "Is this a family tradition?" she asked, openly laughing at the antics of the two men.

"Is what a tradition?" Zach asked as he set her back on her feet. "Oh, I almost forgot. In case you couldn't tell, we're so glad Sebastian found you. Catalina, welcome to the family."

"Being swept off my feet by the men around here. All three of you have done it, though I slept through it when Sebastian did," she sighed.

All three men chuckled and the woman looked on, shaking their heads.

Catalina reached for Sebastian's hand. She was

so overwhelmed with the outpouring of love from these strangers that she now called family that her heart sang with delight. A cry of relief broke from her lips.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian pulled Catalina into his arms knowing that she needed a small respite. "Do you have a spare room we can stay in for the night, Elizabeth? We could both use a little down time before we get into the reasons why we're here. If that's okay with all of you?" He asked out of courtesy, but he would ensure she got the break she needed before the grilling began.

"Sure, no problem," Beth said. "Why don't you both stay in the room you used the last time you stayed with us, Sebastian? You know the way. I imagine that you'd like time to rest after such a long flight."

Elizabeth had always been able to read Sebastian's feelings. It was a little disconcerting to say the least.

Holding Catalina's hand, Sebastian led her to the guest room. It had only been a week since he had last occupied the room. It was then that they'd decided he would wait until Samantha returned to Spain before trying to contact to her. \* \* \* \*

The room was spacious and furnished in a contemporary style. The bed was made of black iron and they used glass end tables as night stands. The dresser had a black finish as well. The only splash of color in the room was a vivid ruby red bedspread with matching pillows.

"Why did you pick this room?" Catalina asked once they were alone.

"Beth knows I like furniture with history so she decided to have a little fun and put me in here." He was smiling when he said it. He obviously considered Beth as his sister.

"Ahh...well that explains it. So why are we really in here?"

"I thought you could use a nice long soak in the Jacuzzi style tub so that you could relax before Sam starts in on you with his questions."

Catalina smiled. "You are a very thoughtful man." She'd had the chance to see a blush on Sebastian's cheek twice today. It looked good on him, she decided.

An hour later Catalina felt like she could take on the world and win, and told Sebastian so. "We've put this off long enough, Bastian." Before he could protest the shortened version of his name, she waved her hand toward the door. "Let's go."

Zach, Jessica, Sam and Beth were all making small talk when they stepped into the room. All conversation stopped as soon as they were spotted. Catalina decided to break the ice first. "Where's little Amy at?"

"She's taking nap. We thought we'd all get to know each other without little ears listening."

Catalina nodded, fully aware of the friendly interrogation to come.

Sam started to speak, then stopped, looking uncomfortable.

She couldn't let his feelings of compassion for her deny him the answers he so desperately needed. "Go ahead, Sam," Catalina told him. "You deserve to have the answers you've waited so long for."

He paused for only a moment before the questions spilled out of him in a rush. "When she was growing up, did Samantha say anything about who killed our parents?" he asked, his voice solemn.

She answered him as honestly as she could. "She spoke of it often when she was young, waking every night from nightmares. She said that her mother told her that the vampires were chasing them, but that she saw the car go over the bend in the road and off the cliff. She knew they were already dead. If you want my opinion, I'd say she saw everything, before it happened or

during."

Sam sighed. "I figured she ran to keep me safe, to keep the vampires that killed our parents off my hide."

Beth was the next one to ply her with questions. "What was she like growing up? When did she go through the change? She wasn't alone, was she? What are her special talents?" Elizabeth fired them off without taking a breath.

"Whoa, slow down, Beth. Let her answer one question before you throw another at her."

"I can't help it, Sam, Samantha's your sister. I want to know everything I can about her."

"I guess you would call Samantha driven while she was growing up. She knew what she wanted to do with her life and she followed through. She always had an agenda and she was adamant that we weren't to contact you until certain events happened. Once they did, she planned to reunite with you. As to when she went through the change, it was within days of arriving to live with us. My mother was with her every step of the way. most predominant psychic Her clairvoyance. Even as a child, she knew that you had to be without her to become the man you are now. It tore her apart, but she did it for you. For the help you would give to our people."

"How did your parents die, Catalina?" Zach asked.

"My father was killed by a vampire. He was a great protector, but I guess he wasn't good enough. Mom died six months later. She just gave up and went to join her mate. I was thirteen when Samantha became not only my sister, but also my mother and best friend."

"I'm so sorry for your loss, to lose both parents so close together. I imagine Samantha knew what you'd need since she and Sam went through the same thing at that age," Beth added, compassion and understanding in her every word, her gentle hands stroked Catalina's arm in an attempt to console her.

"I guess I never thought about it that way before. No wonder Samantha seemed to know exactly when I needed to be alone and when I desperately needed company." Catalina smiled, remembering how Samantha would show up whenever she needed her. The way she'd done ever since moving in with them twenty-one years ago.

When everyone seemed to grow quiet, Sebastian finally spoke up, pulling Catalina into his arms, her back resting against his hard chest.

"Now we have some not so good news for you. When I showed up at Cat's house, she told me that it had been searched recently and that she'd found a message from Samantha." He paused before revealing the worst part of his news. "There was a

message written in blood on her front door. All it said was *You're dead* with no mention as to whom it was directed. It could be one or both of the women. We followed the instructions in the note and went through a secret tunnel to the hidden chamber. As I was descending into the tunnel, I heard a group of men talking and searching for the hidden trapdoor."

"They must have had someone watching the house," muttered Zach. Sam sat, listening in silence, his body tense.

Sebastian nodded. "That was our thinking at the time. We entered the chamber and found the package Samantha left. There was a note inside instructing Cat to bring the letter to you herself. Samantha is definitely clairvoyant, Sam. She knew who you'd be when you grew up and she knew that I was her sister's mate."

"Where is the package? The one she wanted me to see?" Sam asked, heaviness centered in his chest.

"I should have thought to bring it out here," whispered Catalina. She knew exactly what Sam was thinking, how much pain he was in. She couldn't cope with his pain a moment longer. "I'll go get it." She darted out of the room and down the hall to their bedroom. She knew that Sebastian was following her and that was all right with her. She needed to feel his arms around her, holding

her head against his beating heart.

"Are you all right?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her.

A protective hand pulled her closer to him. His voice had an infinitely compassionate tone and she answered him the only way she could—in a broken whisper. "He hurts so much, I couldn't stay in that room with all that pain any longer. Will you bring him the envelope? I need to get out and clear my mind. Just tell everyone I went for a walk if they ask." Sebastian was just about to ask her if she wanted him to come along, but she held up her hand, asking for silence. "Just this once, I need to be alone, okay?" She gulped hard, hot tears running down her face.

\* \* \* \*

Though reluctant, he realized this was something Catalina very much needed. Sebastian nodded his agreement, placed a gentle kiss to her forehead and walked out of their room. He returned to the living room carrying the manila envelope just as the back door creaked open and then closed just as softly. "She just needs a few minutes," Sebastian told them, all eyes were staring at him intently.

"It was me, wasn't it? She could feel everything I was feeling, hear everything I was thinking?" Sam stated, saddened that his new little sister

carried such a heavy burden.

"I haven't asked, but I expect so. I do know that she feels everyone's emotions, not just her own or mine."

Jessica leaned forward in her seat on the sofa. "Doesn't it make any of you uncomfortable with that? I mean nothing is sacred if she can just pluck it out of us. It's as if she's able to spy on us at any time. She could use that against us."

"Or for us," Sam countered.

"Do you honestly believe she chooses to do what she does? Do you think she'd walk willy-nilly into your mind, just because she felt like it? Think of all the perversity and evil she must have felt over the years," shouted Sebastian, not willing to let Catalina take such an insult from one of his own family members.

"Think of all the suffering and loneliness she's endured because people would shy away from her if they knew what she could do?" added Jessica's mate, Zach.

Feeling guilty and properly chastised, Jessica lowered her head and scrunched back in her seat, hugging her knees to her chin. "I'm sorry, Sebastian. I didn't realize all the implications. She must have felt so alone and scared out of her mind when she found that note from Samantha. The one person who understood her was gone. I shouldn't have said the things I did."

Sebastian smiled, understanding her initial reaction. "She wasn't alone for long," he said, trying to comfort her now that he was no longer angry. "And she never will be again. Rest easy, Jessica. I'm sorry I lost my temper with you."

\* \* \* \*

Outside, Catalina was letting the late October breeze waft through her hair. Sitting on a fallen log, she looked up and contemplated the clouds in the sky. Sometimes she wished she could just float away like the clouds do on a breezy day.

To feel such strong emotion took so much out of her. Why would God bequeath her with such a curse? To know truth from lie, good from evil. If only she knew, then maybe this curse could indeed be a gift. Was it her destiny to judge others, to experience someone else's pain, their joy? Or was there a purpose for her gift? One thing she was supposed to learn from someone? Was there a reason that she received this gift? If so, did it have anything to do with their search for her sister? So many questions and no answers in sight.

## Chapter Four

Well, now that that has been taken care of, let me see what my sister hid. Hopefully, I can point out whatever she thought was so important."

Sebastian handed over the envelope and stood waiting. He knew Samantha's letter was still in there, that Sam would be unable to stop himself from reading it. As expected, Sam reached for the carefully folded piece of paper and sniffed it, hoping to smell his sister's scent still lingering on the letter. Sebastian could have told him it was a waste of time, but he kept silent, letting the man grieve in his own way.

When Sam was ready to look at the photos, he would. Feeling the need to be with Cat, Sebastian excused himself and left the house, intent on comforting his mate in any way he could.

He found her sitting on a log, looking up at the passing clouds and running her fingers through Lobo's fur. She had such a wistful look about her,

it made his heart sigh. "Do you want me to go?" he offered, though it pained him to do so.

"No, stay. Keep me company. It's such a beautiful autumn day. Soon the snow will come, won't it?' she asked, not expecting an answer.

Sebastian didn't offer one. Soon enough he'd get to what was on her mind. It came sooner than he had expected.

"You know, don't you? They all know about what I can do?"

"Yes. They do," he told her honestly. *One did not lie to one's mate or you'd forever be in the doghouse* his mother was fond of saying.

"And now they think I'm a freak, don't they? I imagine you were told to stay away from me."

He stepped forward and took her chin in his hand. "Look at me," he whispered hoarsely. "Look into me, if you have to, and tell me what you see."

"I don't need to. I should have known you'd realized right away. You knew when to give me space and when not to. I hurt you by saying what I did. I never meant to hurt you."

Then she cupped his face and looked into his eyes, showing him her feelings. She leaned forward and touched her tongue to his lips, seeking entry. Her tongue sent shivers of desire scorching through him, burning everything in its path, leaving him gasping for breath and

trembling with naked hunger.

Claiming her lips, he crushed her to him, exploring her curves with his hands, making full body contact, letting her feel how much he wanted her, here, now.

It wasn't the time. She wasn't ready and he wanted to mate with her for the first time in their bed, be it on the plane or in the middle of a meadow. He wanted the bonding words said in that bed, wanted his child conceived there as well. He would have it all, when the timing was right.

With supreme effort, he raised his mouth from hers and gazed into her dazed eyes. Good, he thought. She wasn't thinking about any of her fears right now. She was thinking only of him, of the magic they felt every time they looked at each other, every time they touched, every time they spoke intimately using telepathy.

Looking up at the darkening sky, Sebastian took Catalina's hand and led her out of the trees toward the house sitting in the middle of the meadow. "Come on, everyone will be worried about us if we don't hurry back."

Nodding, she started to walk away, then yelled over her back as she took off at a run toward Sam's home. "I bet I can beat you there."

They sprinted across the meadow and as they neared the house, she could feel Sebastian closing in on her. Exhilaration raced through her, knowing that her mate had given chase. Strong arms wrapped around her from behind and pulled her into his embrace as he tumbled them to the ground. She laughed in sheer joy. With Sebastian spooned behind her, she looked up into the night sky, thankful for this one perfect moment in time, when the world around her seemed so far away. Only she and her mate existed in this moment.

"Are you two going to stay out there all night, or come in from the cold?" Zach yelled across the meadow.

Catalina gasped and sat straight up, clearly embarrassed at being caught playing like children. Sebastian shook his head and stood, pulling Catalina up with him as they headed to where Zach stood waiting for them.

Sam was still sitting in the living room holding the letter when Sebastian and Catalina entered the room. "I'm sorry you lost so many years. I'm sorry you lost her, but I can't be sorry that she's my sister, too," Catalina whispered.

\* \* \* \*

Sam looked up, surprise written across his features. "I'd never expect you to regret the time you had with her. I don't begrudge you the fact that you had more years with her than I. I'm just glad that, for now, we can both have time with

her. Once you find her, of course.

"We'll be leaving for Blake's house first thing in the morning, if that's all right with you?"

Sam nodded. "Just fine with me. I'm dying to have her in our lives. She's a missing part of me and important, not only to me, but to our people. Her talent and yours, little sister, will be a real asset in our fight to save not only ourselves but the humans we protect."

Catalina was speechless for a moment and then she regained her voice. "I'll help in any way I can," she vowed.

Sebastian knew the last twenty-four hours had been an emotional upheaval and that Cat needed some rest. He turned to Sam. "We're going up to bed now. Let us know as soon as you have those photos analyzed. It just might help us find the people chasing Samantha and make it possible for her to come home."

"I'll be on it first thing. You two go ahead, get some sleep. It's a four hour drive to where they're living."

\* \* \* \*

With that said, the pair headed up the stairs together. Catalina was nervous. She'd never slept with anyone before, not even her parents when she'd had nightmares. She knew she'd jump his

bones if she weren't so tired. She also knew that Sebastian was just as exhausted, having flown the plane for most of the trip.

There would be time enough for that when they reached Blake's place. It was only Thursday night and her sister wouldn't call until sometime Sunday. Sometime during the weekend, she would seduce her mate and bind him to her.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian followed in Catalina's wake, watching her ass sashay up the stairs, doing everything but cooling down his already overheated libido. She was too exhausted to make love to him tonight, but sometime this weekend he would seduce the woman and make her his permanently by saying the ritual bonding words.

When they reached the bedroom, Catalina hesitated.

Sebastian simply reached past her and opened the door. "Nothing will happen tonight other than me holding you while we sleep. You've no reason to fear I'll lose control."

"It's not you I'm afraid will lose control. It's me," she answered honestly.

Sebastian didn't allow his reaction to her words to sway his decision. In fact, he sure hoped she'd didn't sleep in the nude. No, he amended, he hoped she didn't sleep in the buff *tonight*. Tomorrow night, that was another matter.

Sebastian cleared his throat, while Catalina stared at the bed, amazed by its beauty and nervous about the coming hours. Would he keep his word? Would she let him?

Sebastian brushed past her, hoping that giving her some time before mating with her would relieve some of the tension radiating off her. He headed for his bag and started ruffling through it, looking for the one pair of sweats he'd happened to pack. Wearing them would be his attempt to reassure her that his intentions tonight were honorable.

\* \* \* \*

Catalina watched as Sebastian gathered his shaving kit and a pair of dark gray sweat pants. It didn't put her at ease. She struggled to figure out what to wear to bed as she always slept in her birthday suit. She hadn't even packed any T-shirts.

She heard the shower start and dashed out of the room and down the hall. Maybe Jessica or Elizabeth had a long nightgown she could wear. Hopefully, they were still up. She found the women huddled around the kitchen table, sipping on some chamomile tea. "Mind if I have a cup of that and a nightgown, please?" Catalina asked boldly.

Jessica sputtered, choking on her tea.

"What?" Elizabeth asked, needing to hear her request one more time.

"Look, I normally sleep naked so I forgot to pack anything to sleep in." When both women looked at her as if asking what the problem was, she nearly shouted out her frustration. "I can't sleep naked with the man. I just met him."

Jessica and Elizabeth shared a look and then Elizabeth stood, set down her tea and said, "Follow me."

Catalina swallowed when she saw what Elizabeth had to offer. Looking at the array of silks and brilliant colors, Catalina finally settled on a slinky, black, silk nightgown that reached midthigh on her. "Well, if I wanted to drive him nuts, I think this would do it," she muttered. Turning to Elizabeth, she asked, "You don't happen to have an old granny nightgown that's shaped like a grain sack, do you?"

Elizabeth shook her head, chuckling. "Nope, this is all I have. I don't usually wear anything to bed either and when I do, it doesn't stay on long." Elizabeth continued to chuckle until Catalina playfully shoved her. "You have to admire the lustiness of our race, if nothing else," Elizabeth announced.

By the time Catalina returned to the room with

her tea and the nightgown, Sebastian was already in bed, his back turned toward her. Of course, that meant when she came to bed he'd be facing her side. Either way he was going to notice what was she was going to be sleeping in.

Cat quickly walked past the bed and into the adjoining bathroom, happy to see that someone had already brought her toiletries to her. No doubt, it was Sebastian's doing. She set her tea on the counter, draped the tiny slip of silk over the towel rack and started filling the tub. She'd take a long luxurious bath and soak her tense muscles, anything to put off joining Bastian in the bed for a little while longer.

She was so hot for him, she was afraid she might actually lose control. She warred with herself, the desire for him running hot and thick in her blood against the need to find her sister and get to know Sebastian personally before taking the next step.

That didn't mean she was going to let him get away with not saying the mating vows to her this weekend, even if she had to seduce him to get them said. Spending the night in the same bed with him would tell her more about Sebastian's likes and dislikes.

She already knew he preferred lying on the side of the bed closest to the door. His protective instincts told him to place himself between her and any possible danger, the same as when she'd shared a room with her sister. In the morning, she would know even more about him.

Every minute she spent in Sebastian's company was a minute that she felt alive and full of joy. She had no doubt in her mind that they'd make love very soon. But she was determined that it wouldn't be tonight.

Catalina found a bottle of bubble bath sitting on a shelf at the end of the tub, and poured a liberal amount into the water. She wanted to float in the bubbles like she used to as a child and let all her cares disappear as the bubbles popped and fizzed around her.

Before she knew it, the bubbles were gone and the water had turned cold. She couldn't put off going to bed any longer. Besides, Sebastian was more than likely asleep by now. She'd been soaking for at least thirty minutes.

After rubbing her melon-scented lotion on her skin and donning the black silk nightie, she headed into the bedroom, tiptoeing her way to her side of the bed.

\* \* \* \*

From the other side of the room, Sebastian sucked in his breath and his entire body froze. He'd waited for what seemed like ages for her to gather up the courage to come to him and now his brain had completely shut down. God, she was the sexiest woman on Earth and she was all his, every delectable and sinful inch of her.

The silk of the nightgown draped over her curves, tempting and teasing his senses every step she took toward the bed. If she had any idea what was going through his mind, she'd run like hell. He had to control his feelings or she'd notice them and it wouldn't take much for him to break his vow to give her at least one more day to come to him.

He would at least follow through with one thing tonight and that was say his vows to her. He couldn't stop now even if the whole planet needed saving and he was one of the only one left to accomplish it. He had to say the binding words now.

As she moved closer to the bed, a shaft of moonlight gave Sebastian a view of her he'd never forget. He could see the flare of her hips, the long length of her legs as they met the juncture of her thighs. Her long blonde hair swirling around her waist with every breath she took. It was as memorizing as the arousal glittering in her eyes. She was as aware of him as he was of her. How in the hell were they going to get through the night?

He wasn't. They had to leave. Now. Get to his plane in Albany, say their vows and most

definitely make love. Sam could call them once he found out any information. It was the only way he'd be able to stay sane the rest of the night. No way could he lie next to her all night with her wrapped in his arms and be celibate. It was a physical impossibility.

Since Catalina still hadn't moved from her position at the foot of the bed, her eyes now glazed, her pulse thumping at her throat, he didn't think she'd object to his plan. Sebastian's voice was raspy when he spoke, "Get dressed. We're leaving. We have to get to the plane."

Still she didn't move, didn't respond.

"Do you have any problem with that? Because there is no way in hell I can sleep with you and not make love to you."

That confession quickly caught her attention and she swallowed convulsively, trying to control her heart rate as she said, "It sounds like a damn good idea to me. I'll be dressed and ready to go in five minutes flat."

"I'll go tell Sam we're heading out. He has my cell number and if he's in bed, I'll just leave him a note. Tell him we were in a hurry to get to Blake's."

They both knew that Sam would know why they'd left, but they each pretended it was their own little secret. Lobo was waiting for them outside when they reached the car as if he, too, knew that the night was scented with sexual heat and his companions were in a hurry to get somewhere.

Within fifteen minutes, in the car headed for Albany, both Sebastian and Catalina were so hot for each other neither knew how they were going to survive the nearly two-hour drive to the airport hanger where the plane was stored.

## Chapter Five

They arrived at the airport in just over an hour, a new record for the trip back from the Adirondacks and Sam's place for Sebastian. Neither Sebastian nor Catalina wanted to wait another minute longer than they had to to commit to one another, to join their souls together.

No sooner had they gotten on the plane, then Sebastian started heading toward the rear cabin with Catalina hot on his heels. Instead of heading toward the bed and shedding his clothes like she'd wanted him to do since she'd met the man, he headed toward the desk.

As if what he was about to do was no big deal, Sebastian casually began speaking. "About four months ago when we learned that Samantha was still alive, I knew that deep inside, I'd find you when I set out to look for her. So I had a friend of mine design these specifically for us."

He held a jeweler's box. She wouldn't have to say the words first after all. She wanted to weep with happiness, jump around in excitement. She couldn't wait to peek at what was inside the box. After that, she'd just jump him.

The engagement ring was an emerald-cut diamond with tapered ruby baguettes marching down each side of the center stone, set in platinum. The matching ruby eternity band was gorgeous.

\* \* \* \*

For himself, Sebastian had chosen a plain platinum band for his big finger. He knew Catalina would be deserving of such exquisite beauty. As soon as he'd seen Alyssa's shop this past summer, he'd had her design the set for him, knowing it wouldn't be long before he'd need them. He had, in fact, just picked them up the week before heading to Spain.

Dropping down to his knees, Sebastian took her hands in his and, with his voice strong and sure, he said his vows to her. "Catalina, know that forever and always you are my wife, my mate, my equal in all things, the missing half of my soul." Though it wasn't part of the vows, he added, "You complete me." Now the question was, would she accept him, even though they'd known each other only a couple of days?

When she nodded, he sighed in relief.

He placed the rings on her finger, then brought her left hand up to his lips and placed a kiss upon her fingertips.

\* \* \* \*

Catalina was speechless for all of about a second, and then she repeated the sacred words back to him. "Sebastian, know that forever and always you are my husband, my mate, my equal in all things, the missing half of my soul."

Taking the matching band from the jeweler's box, she knelt down next to her mate and slid it onto his ring finger, adding with reverence, "You complete me, too."

Almost immediately, his mouth covered hers hungrily. It was a kiss of pure possession. She wasn't even shocked at her own eager response to the touch of his lips. Every moment that they'd spent together had been leading to this, this one moment when she gave all of herself to her mate.

His lips seared a path down her neck, her shoulders, as he slowly unveiled her beautiful body to his gaze.

She felt the heady sensation of his breath against her neck and arched her body in response, her hands gripping his thighs to keep herself still for his questing mouth. His lips continued their exploration of her neck and shoulders, the hollow of her throat, but she was having none of it. She wanted the taste of his lips against hers. She wanted to take control.

She thrust her fingers through his thick hair and pulled him to her. Her kiss was full of urgency and need, heat and passion, which only made it that much hotter, that much more powerful.

It wasn't long before kissing wasn't enough for either of them.

His lips slowly followed the path of his fingers as he undid her blouse, inch by inch.

Unable to contain the fires burning deep within, she guided his mouth to her rosy nipples, desperate to feel his lips against their sensitive peaks. Needing to feel his skin beneath her hands, she grabbed the neck of his shirt and ripped it down the front, tossing it across the room and out of her way.

They separated only long enough to peel the rest of their clothes away before falling into each other's arms again. Now, at last, no barriers separated them. They were finally free to explore every inch of each other. Their hands, their mouths, caressed with fleeting touches, the desire to learn each other's bodies, undeniable.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian could feel his heart racing uncontrollably. It might thump out of his chest at any moment. For the first time in his life, he was intoxicated with the touch of another, with the sensations of flesh meeting flesh, and it could only be because she was his one true mate, the missing half of his soul.

His hands wandered down her silky smooth thighs as her fingers trailed down his muscular torso, tracing his nipples with first her fingers and then her tongue, torturing them into hard little nubs.

\* \* \* \*

Catalina was lost in a whirlwind of passion. She tingled everywhere, her every nerve ending alive and on fire. The hairs at the nape of her stood on end. Her whole body ached with desire, in anticipation of making love with her mate. She exalted at his male strength, at the beauty of him inside and out. A tremor inside her heated her thighs and groin until it was almost painful. Her need was so great.

\* \* \* \*

His fingers continued their upward trail toward her hot, moist womanhood. He could smell her arousal, could practically taste it. He gently ran his thumb over her clit and she moaned in response.

Lost in a haze of passion, time slowed to a crawl, every second lasting a minute, every minute an hour. The flames within them burned higher and higher, brighter and brighter, as they rode the hot tide of passion as it raged on and on.

Sebastian sensed the mounting heat within Catalina and knew his own control was nearly at an end. He kissed the tip of her nose, then slowly moved away from her, getting to his feet before gently pulling her up next to him so that their bodies touched. Not being able to stand even a tiny separation, he wrapped his arms around her waist as he led her to their bed. "Come with me. Join me in our bed. Our first time shouldn't be on the floor," he whispered, his voice husky and laced with seduction.

\* \* \* \*

The prolonged anticipation was almost unbearable for Catalina. He looked over at her seductively and smiled, then swept her into his arms and gently lowered her to the hand-carved bed. She got lost in his intense gaze. She could feel the intense arousal, the flare of heat threatening to burn out of control.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian was mesmerized. His gaze raked boldly over her. With her olive skin and long blonde hair combined with her sea-green eyes, she was an exotic beauty. Her jutting breasts were firm in his hands, and her hair was like strands of silk as they wrapped around his hands, his body.

He liked the way she looked in their bed. They were finally at home in this room. As though the previous minutes had never happened, he began a slow exploration of Catalina's body, using lips, teeth and tongue, driving her to the edge. He was a big man and he wanted her well prepared for him. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her during their joining.

"Please," she begged him.

"Your body's not ready to accept mine yet, but you will be. Soon. I promise."

"What do you mean I'm not ready?" She gasped.

When she instinctively began to move against his finger, he eased a second inside her and then finally a third, stretching her as much as he could so that when he entered her he wouldn't cause her pain.

Catalina easily rolled Sebastian onto his back and began her own exploration. "I need you," she said in a low voice, husky with unspent passion. "Now."

Sebastian sat up, drew her astride him and then leaned back against the headboard, letting her set her own pace, getting her used to the feel of how hard he was for her. He didn't want her to be frightened when he entered her. He could feel her wetness against his swollen cock, and it about killed him to let her have free reign over his body.

He gasped as her fingers wrapped around his cock, lightly squeezing then softly stroking his heavy sac. She trailed her fingers up and down the length of his erection until he groaned. She moaned with need, with desperation. Sebastian rolled them over until he was again on top, then growled, "Roll over, honey. This first time might be a little rough, but we have to mate this way for our vows to be complete."

She rolled onto her belly and Sebastian trailed a finger down her spine. Then he studied her bottom, taking each cheek in his hands. They were a perfect fit, high and firm. Her body was in prime condition, well toned and sleekly muscular. His mouth was watering. He couldn't wait any longer to mount her.

Ever so slowly, he eased into her from behind, entering just a bit and then stopping until her body could adjust. Inch by inch he sank into to her. She was so wet for him and tight. It was like being wrapped in a silken fist.

He kept his movements slow and steady until he reached her maidenhead. After a brief pause for the pain he knew she was going to feel, Sebastian broke through the proof of her virginity and thrust home.

He was so deep inside her, he could feel her womb pressed against his cockhead. The only thing he could think of at that moment was that it was too bad she wasn't in heat for then he could give her his child. That time would come soon enough though.

\* \* \* \*

Catalina felt stretched to her limits. He was so large, she didn't think she could move and survive. He must have sensed her discomfort through their bond because he stopped moving until the ache between her thighs eased. When the dull pain passed, he began moving in slow gentle strokes.

He drew her to a height of passion she'd never imagined existed. Ever so slowly, in and out, in and out, he moved until she began matching his rhythm, meeting his thrusts halfway, eager to feel his body filling hers. Their pace quickened and Sebastian bent over her, pinning her shoulders with his teeth, keeping her in the submissive position required during the initial mating ritual.

Gently his hands outlined the circles of her breasts and then began teasing her nipples unmercifully as he continued to pump into her tight channel.

\* \* \* \*

"Please," she begged, "I need..." She didn't know how to go on, all she knew was that she was close to something unbelievable, that she couldn't take his teasing her body anymore.

Trailing his hands down her waist and to her hips, Sebastian whispered into her ear, "What do you need?"

"More. I need more."

Sebastian gave it to her, moving his fingers between her legs, and rubbing the hard nub of her clit until she was bucking beneath him, screaming out her release.

Waves of ecstasy throbbed through her. The pleasure he gave her was pure and explosive. An amazing sense of completeness filled her, something that had been missing her entire life. No wonder their kind mated for life. How else could they survive long without this, this feeling that their souls were joyfully happy and their hearts completely full?

He rubbed the bare skin of her back, her shoulders, gripping her again with his teeth as finally, he began thrusting harder and deeper, faster than before until he, too, reached his climax, jetting his semen deep inside her.

Sebastian collapsed on top of her, their bodies still joined. They were flesh against flesh, man against woman. Their souls were now one.

Catalina sighed in utter satisfaction, not even caring that Sebastian pinned her to the bed. She was too deliriously happy and sated to move.

\* \* \* \*

After a few minutes of gathering his wits, Sebastian gently eased out of her and gathered Catalina into his arms. "I didn't hurt you did I?"

Catalina just smiled as she laid her head against his still thumping heart. "Of course not. You didn't hear me complaining, did you?" After a few moments of contented silence, she admitted, "That was more wonderful than I could have ever dreamed possible." She drew his face to hers in a soul-searing kiss. It was a kiss of devotion and the beginnings of love.

\* \* \* \*

When she once again rested her head upon his chest, Sebastian placed a tender kiss on the top of her head. Then he realized that he was completely wrapped in her glorious blonde mane. It lent the

moment such an air of intimacy that it left him stunned. She would never cut her hair, if he had anything to say about it. He wanted to see it spread all over him every night for the rest of their lives, connecting them even in sleep.

They spent the long hours of the night sleeping in each other's arms, waking up only to make love. Again and again, the heat flared up between them through the night, and again and again, they answered its call.

Cat eased out of Sebastian's hold, made her way to the edge of the bed and crept into the bathroom.

Sebastian was aware the moment Catalina had woken. He'd been enjoying watching her sleep. He saw the confusion in her eyes, the self-doubt, the regret, as soon as she opened her sleepy eyes.

On the trip to Sam's they'd talked, learned about each other, something that neither had waited for before hopping in bed. She was probably feeling as guilty as he was for breaking their vows to each other about saying hands off last night. But by God, what a night it had been. One he couldn't regret.

\* \* \* \*

Catalina took her time with her shower, putting on lotion and blow-drying her hair before coming out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel. Her cheeks were rosy as she looked over at Sebastian's naked body, knowing he'd discarded the sheet after she'd left for the bathroom. She wasn't about to look away from such a sight either.

"Good morning, honey," Sebastian called to her as she walked into the room, his face alight with satisfaction and wearing nothing but a smug smile. A well deserved one at that.

She cleared her throat and smiled back. How could she not? His thick blond hair was mussed and his unshaven face was sexy rather than unkempt. He turned her heart over every time he smiled at her. No matter what she felt about giving into her hormones last night, she couldn't regret a single moment of it, and she wouldn't pretend to. "And a fabulous morning to you, too, Bastian," she replied.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian was startled, expecting his mate to be shy and reserved this morning, not this exuberant woman standing before him wearing nothing but a grin and a towel. Who was he to question his good fortune that she wasn't acting as he'd expected?

It left him unsure of how to proceed though. Should he saunter over to her and kiss her good morning, like they'd been waking up together every day? Or should he keep a friendly distance until she let him know what she wanted?

But why in the hell would he keep his distance? This was Catalina. He would hide neither his attraction nor his feelings from her any longer. Besides as an empath, she would see right through him anyway.

She took the decision out of his hands, marching over to him, grabbing him by the hair and laying her lips against his in a scorching kiss. When he was finally able to come up for air, he thought he heard her say something about joining him back in bed if he didn't get a move on, but it could have just been wishful thinking on his part.

She was already dressed in jeans and a sweater before he gathered his wits enough to jump out of bed, sweep her into his arms to greet her properly. His tongue traced the soft fullness of her lips before gaining entry and exploring the recesses of her mouth, leaving her body aching with need.

\* \* \* \*

How could a single kiss from him tempt her beyond all reason? Before they made love again, she would get to know something about him. She wouldn't break her vow to herself again.

When he finally released her mouth, he gazed

into her eyes. "Are you okay?"

"I feel fine. But we do need to talk," she told him, relieved to finally get out what she'd been wary of saying since she'd woken up. "We barely know each other and that makes me uncomfortable."

"I agree wholeheartedly. I want to get to know you. No, I need to know everything there is to know about you," he admitted.

"Well then, we have a long drive ahead of us to find out some of the answers. Then I can seduce you at the next opportunity that arises, if you catch my drift," she said, pointedly looking at his impressive morning erection. She left Sebastian staring after her as she headed toward the galley.

\* \* \* \*

Within fifteen minutes he was shaved, showered and dressed and on his way to find her. When he couldn't find her on the plane, he sent out a mental call. Where are you, honey?

I was starving. Thought I'd get us something greasy from somewhere near the airport. I have four ham and egg sandwiches and a couple of coffees to go, sitting right alongside of me.

Oh bless you, he said fervently. He hadn't realized how hungry he was until she'd mentioned it, but he definitely needed to refuel

after their marathon night of lovemaking.

I hope you don't mind that I borrowed your nifty little Jag.

Of course not. Then after a beat, he said, deadpan, You can drive, can't you?

She took it as he'd meant it and sent a husky chuckle through their telepathic bond. It was enough of a connection with her for now. He wanted her back by his side, immediately. He missed her throaty laughs and smartass wit. And she'd only been gone a few minutes. He was well and truly a goner and he loved every bit of it.

\* \* \* \*

After sitting down to a hastily devoured breakfast, they retrieved Lobo from the plane, then settled into Sebastian's gunmetal-gray Jaguar and headed through the Holland tunnel toward Jersey City and their trip to the Jersey Shore. They'd drop the wolf off at a kennel they'd found near Blake and Alyssa's home.

Blake was probably going nuts waiting on him to arrive with news about Samantha as it was Blake who began searching for her five years earlier. Without his lead about the Underground Railroad shepherding their people out of danger, they wouldn't have this chance now.

More than likely Blake was running around

trying to keep Alyssa off her feet. Her triplets were due in just a couple of weeks and she was still busy working, albeit only sketching out designs for her jewelry instead of bent over her workbench. With the chance that the children could be born prematurely, Blake would have her off her feet and in bed resting every minute if her brother, Jack, hadn't given the okay for her to work in small increments at home.

Right now though, he knew Catalina had questions about him just as he did about her. With that in mind, he turned his head toward her. "What would you like to know about me first?"

## Chapter Six

Catalina considered it for a moment and then casked her first question. "I guess I'd like to hear about your family. Tell me about each of them, and why Sam and Blake are treated as family, too."

"Okay. Let me start with Zachary. He's the oldest, he's thirty-seven. I was born a year later and our little sister, Isabella, was only twenty-four when she died last year."

"And your mom and dad?"

"Our mother, Beatrice, is still living on the compound with us in Canada in a home she had built when my father, Henry, was killed six years ago. She was only nineteen when she had my brother, but she was so in love with my father. She still is to this day.

"How did Isabella die?" she asked, knowing it would hurt Sebastian just to think about it. But she needed to understand him.

"She and my uncle were helping a vampire,

though she thought what she was doing was for the good of the pack. She died battling our uncle after she learned she'd lost her soul for no other reason than my uncle's need for power."

Knowing she should steer the subject to safer ground, Catalina asked about his friends. "And where do Sam and Blake fit into this picture?"

"Well, Sam's family was close to mine even before any of us were born. We always spent summers together at one of three places...the compound in Canada where I live, the one in California or at Sam's plantation in New Orleans.

"It's common for males to foster out to learn their skills as they're developing. Sam's father chose to have Sam foster with us. We met Blake at the California compound the year after Sam's parents died. Since he had no male family members left, he came to the Canadian compound to foster with us. By then, Sam had been basically adopted into our pack."

"So you all grew up together through your teens and into adulthood?"

"That's about the sum of it, honey. For some reason, we were always closer to Blake than to each other. It was as if we knew that deep down, he was the one who needed the male bonding the most. Anyway, to this day, I'm still closest with Blake than to my own brother and Sam. Though I love them all," he added, wanting her to

understand the relationships.

"And how did Zach and Sam meet their mates?"

Sebastian laughed the first real joyful laugh she'd gotten out of him in hours. "Zach met his on a commercial airline flight. He caught her scent and propositioned her right in the middle of the coach section. She said when he had his own plane with a bed she might consider joining the Mile High Club with him. They've been inseparable ever since."

"And Elizabeth? How did Sam meet her?"

Reaching for her hand, Sebastian gave it a squeeze then turned his attention back on the road. "He read one of her books and thought she might be one of us. Instead of sending Blake along to investigate like he normally would, he went himself. I guess her soul was calling to his, like mine was to yours."

After passing several cars in the lane ahead of him, he continued his story. "Anyway, she was under attack when they met. After taking care of the vampire, they met at a diner in a town a few minutes from her home. He said his half of the vows to her in the middle of a crowded diner. She didn't know she had to repeat them back for them to be bound together."

Catalina nibbled her bottom lip as she listened intently.

"Eventually, they worked it all out, but not until the battle that happened at the Canadian compound last year. That's when Blake found out that the vampire that had orchestrated the whole thing was his birth father. Apparently, his mother's rape was what ended up getting his father killed by the bunch of humans who caught him when she made her escape."

She gasped, horrified such a thing had happened. Such a hideous thing to have to endure, and by one of their own, was more than dishonorable. It was an atrocity.

"They didn't properly dispose of his remains and just buried him. He rose as a vampire and, for thirty years, he held a grudge, killing off every member of his family until only Elizabeth and Blake remained alive. Blake finally executed the vampire not too long ago." Sebastian paused his tale while he changed lanes to get around an old beat up Ford sedan, then turned his head toward Catalina.

"I have one more question."

"Go ahead. You can ask me anything and I'll tell you the truth

"I know you will. So tell me, why is it we're going to Blake's? Wouldn't a phone call have been just as helpful? And saved us all this driving."

Sebastian grinned like a child who'd just pulled one over on his parents. "Because I have a surprise for you." Before she could question him further Sebastian interrupted her. "And I want Blake to meet you. I've been speaking for most of the trip. When is it my turn to learn more about you?" Sebastian asked.

\* \* \* \*

Catalina knew the last couple of hours had been hard on Sebastian. She was more than happy to speak about herself for a while. By the time he finished asking his questions about her, they should be about at Blake's and Sebastian's mood would lift. She couldn't wait to meet Blake and Alyssa. "Ask away. I'm an open book."

"So what made you decide to go into Zoology?"

"At first it was because I have a natural talent with animals. They are as drawn to me as I am to them. Lobo is an example. Honestly, some zoos are notorious for treating their animals horribly. I wanted to make sure that didn't happen. I was a kid then and didn't know I couldn't change the whole world by my will alone."

Catalina smiled, the memory bringing with it happy thoughts of childhood. "Anyway, after a while, I started following Samantha on some of her assignments and thought I wonder how they live? What makes these animals choose certain territories? How do they choose their mates?

Eventually, I started taking college courses and got my bachelors degree. When Samantha said my career would lead me to you, I started spending as much time in the field as I did at the zoos." She turned in her seat to face Sebastian. "One day, I'd like to create a sanctuary for animals. One where even our people and other Were folk will feel comfortable to run and enjoy themselves."

"I agree with you," Sebastian said. "There aren't enough places left for us to have a true sanctuary. To let our animal selves out to hunt or play or to enjoy all the sensations that go along with being in our other form."

"So what was it really like growing up with Samantha for an older sister? Didn't it feel strange to have a big sister all of a sudden?"

"I was so young. For me it was more of a heroine worship thing. I followed her around like a puppy and she stood up for me. She became my protector before I even knew what that meant. Whomever she ends up with will find that she hasn't changed. By all rights, that's exactly what she is, a protector of our people. She takes her job very seriously and removes any threat she finds with a ruthlessness that is a bit unsettling at times. At least for me," Catalina admitted.

"Then she'll need someone to balance her, to give her the compassion she needs. Her match is out there, just as I was waiting for you. It'll just take some time. But first we need to find her."

"Will your friend Blake be able to do that?" she asked, uncertain that anyone could find her sister if she didn't want to be found.

Sebastian glanced over at her and answered truthfully. "If Blake can't find her, then he knows the kind of people who can. Don't worry. If we can do anything to help your sister, we will, honey," he assured her.

Catalina nodded, reached over, squeezed Sebastian's hand and prayed that he was right. That they'd find her sister before she got into something she couldn't handle alone.

Within minutes, they were exiting the Garden State parkway and heading toward Alyssa's shop. If she wasn't there, someone would be, and they'd know where to track down Blake. He could call Blake on his cell phone, but then he couldn't make his friend wait to meet Catalina. Better to arrive impulsively than to let Blake suffer with curiosity.

\* \* \* \*

Knowing his friend, Sebastian figured that Blake was in the hidden chamber used for the Underground. Located below Alyssa's Jewelry shop, it held journals from those who'd traveled the railway. Usually, Blake spent the mornings looking through the journals to see if he could

locate any more of their people. More than likely, he'd already compiled a list of names and possible locations for Sebastian to try to track down. Some of the packs disappeared centuries ago and finding them was proving to be difficult.

As soon as they'd located Samantha, he'd talk it over with Catalina. He was positive she'd want to help him in his search. He'd be sure to make time to locate a possible piece of land somewhere during their travels that they could use as the sanctuary she'd been dreaming about. It was a damn good idea. Someone should have thought about such a place long ago. Until they'd weeded out those of their people who were helping the vampires though, only a select few could know that the idea was in the works.

Lost in thought, Sebastian suddenly realized he had been driving on autopilot and was less than a block from Alyssa's shop. He glanced over at Catalina to tell her they were almost there only to find her sound asleep. He couldn't blame her, he hadn't let her get much sleep last night. Wake up, honey. We're about there, he whispered.

Catalina sighed and stretched just like a cat, then looked over at Sebastian as the car slowed to a crawl alongside a busy boardwalk. "There already? When did I fall asleep?" she murmured, her voice still husky from sleep.

"Sometime in the last fifteen minutes. I was lost

in thought and went to tell you we were about here and you were sound asleep."

"I earned it," she declared. "I kept you busy all night. I need to recoup my energies for later."

Sebastian looked over at her questioningly, one eyebrow lifted as he waited.

"There will be a later. I plan on seducing you again tonight."

"Hey," he argued as he pulled into a parking spot about two blocks from Alyssa's shop, "I seduced you last night."

"Hah. Who came in wearing a barely-there black nightie last night, hmmm..." she asked.

"Okay, you've got a point. Who am I to argue? You can seduce me anytime, anywhere."

\* \* \* \*

"Now that does have possibilities," she said wickedly, mentally sending Sebastian vivid images of her straddling him as he laid on the open beach, beneath the moonlight, wearing nothing but a sexy grin and a cowboy hat.

Catalina winked at him and grabbed his hand as he opened her door for her. She laced their fingers together. *Hi ho, Silver,* she said, winging the thought to his mind, knowing it would rev him up. Hell, if she had to be horny so should he. "Lead the way," she said, laughing.

\* \* \* \*

The shop door chimed when the pair entered the showroom of Alyssa's shop. A woman Sebastian had never met was working the counter, helping a young couple browse through the unique wedding sets Alyssa had designed. She wasn't an ordinary woman either. Both Catalina and Sebastian stared at the woman, all of their senses going on alert.

Were-cat. Since when did Alyssa employ a Were-cat to help run the shop? He and Blake definitely had to talk about some things. Maybe she, too, was on the run and had decided to make a stand here in New Jersey. Sebastian would find out about her story soon enough.

When the young couple had made their decision and had walked out of the boutique with glowing faces, Sebastian and Catalina stepped up to the counter. "We're looking for Blake. He's expecting us," he told her.

She smiled. Blake had been up the stairs at least half a dozen times in the last hour asking about his friend. "You must be Sebastian and Catalina. He's been going nuts waiting for you two to show up. He's downstairs."

Sebastian smiled. He couldn't help it. It was just the reaction he'd been hoping for. "Thanks. We'll let ourselves down." Taking Catalina's hand he led her away before she spotted something in the store she had to have. He'd let her shop to her heart's content as soon as she'd met his best friend.

\* \* \* \*

Blake was halfway up the stairs to ask about Sebastian again when the chamber door opened, highlighting the very man he was waiting for. "It's about damn time you two showed up. I've been expecting you for hours."

"Sorry about that." Sebastian said matter of fact, with not an ounce of true apology in his voice. By the rosy hue to the woman's cheeks, Blake could guess what had kept them from arriving on time.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian met Blake in the middle of the stairway and pulled him into a bone-crunching hug as though it had been months since their last visit instead of barely over a week. "It's damn good to see you. I'm sorry I didn't call, but I wanted to surprise you. I see Sam warned you we were coming."

Catalina peeked around Sebastian's shoulder

and gave him a shove. Sebastian obediently moved out of her way. "I'm Catalina, Sebastian's mate. He's told me so much about you, I feel like we've already met. Your mate makes beautiful things, by the way. You must be so proud."

Blake beamed. "Come down the rest of the stairs and then you'll be able to tell her for yourself. She insisted on coming with me today even though she should be in bed resting."

"How long before the babies are due?" Sebastian asked.

"A couple of weeks, but they'll probably come early."

Blake just grinned like the proud father he was. "Last ultra sound showed two girls and a boy, just as Keenan predicted. Again."

"The man has a way with healing and so does Catalina," said the heavily pregnant woman lying on the couch, her head raised on a mass of pillows and a sketchpad in her lap. Looking over at Blake with a grimace, Alyssa said from across the room, "I'd get up and introduce myself, but I've been warned not to leave this couch."

"Then let me come to you. I'm Catalina Gasa...uh...Malone."

\* \* \* \*

Alyssa looked the blonde woman over and then

glanced at Sebastian. "I'm Alyssa Donovan. I'm so happy to meet you. Perhaps now that handsome man of yours will smile more often. He's been a real grouch the whole time I've known him." Her gaze held Sebastian's as she waited for a response.

When he smiled instead of rising to the bait, Alyssa realized that Sebastian was finally whole and happy. They must have already gone through the bonding ritual to put that kind of smile on the man's face, which would explain why they were about eight hours late in arriving. Knowing Sebastian the way she did, the only reason he didn't call to tell them they would be late was just to get a rise out of Blake.

"So when did the feline start working here?" Sebastian asked, speaking to no one in particular.

"She showed up about three weeks ago, on the run. She got here and decided that running to another country didn't suit her. She came from Tino's old pack."

\* \* \* \*

"Tino?" Catalina asked, blankly. Apparently, there was a lot she needed to catch up on. Since when did werewolves and Were-cats work together?

"About four months ago, Tino helped us expose his older brother in a conspiracy to kidnap Blake's mother. He's living with Rafe Castillo now, the leader of the Were-cats."

"If she's on the run, why doesn't she join Tino? There is more protection in a pack than all alone."

Blake turned to his friend and gave him a straight up answer. "Because Melissa is also clairvoyant and knows that Rafe is her mate. She said she's not ready to be mated so she's avoiding him until the last possible moment, which is why she looked me up instead of joining her cousin in Georgia."

Sebastian chuckled. "Well, you know who Sam has called in to help with finding Samantha, don't you? Rafe. I imagine he'll be arriving at Sam's place within the next couple of days. She won't be able to avoid him forever. He's bound to come here to see you eventually since he'll be traveling with us after Samantha calls tomorrow."

\* \* \* \*

"Well, I expect her to come down and tell me she needs to take off. She isn't about to let Rafe catch her if she can help it." Blake looked over at his heavily pregnant wife, knowing her concern wasn't for the loss of an employee. It was imperative the Underground stop remain open even while she delivered their children. "We'll just take it as it comes, baby," said Blake and then turned back to Sebastian and Catalina." And where

do I come in?" Blake asked, already knowing the answer.

"We need your investigative services to track her down using her new alias," Catalina answered. "She's using her birth name."

"You mean she's come out of the closet so to speak. We've been searching for her the last few months using the alias Erica Samuels."

"I don't know when she reverted back to her old name. She never told me. No doubt it's her attempt to keep me safe...from something."

## Chapter Seven

Blake glanced at his wife, and again connected with her. Her priority was keeping the Railroad open. Unless finding Samantha helped keep the Railroad open, she wanted him to take a pass on this one, at least until the babies were born.

"Would you folks mind...if I spoke to my wife for a moment?" Blake said slowly.

"Not at all!" they said in unison. But they didn't move and that irritated the hell out of him.

"Ah, sure. We'll be... upstairs in the office." As an afterthought Sebastian added, "You know this is what Sam would want." With that said, they headed back up toward the shop.

"Blake, you know-"

"I know exactly what you're going to say, but baby, I need to take this case."

Alyssa shifted her jaw to the right in that annoying habit she had picked up from somewhere.

Blake crossed the room and sat at her side on the sofa. He gently pushed the hair from her face and placed a tender kiss on her forehead. "I never said I was leaving you. You heard what Sebastian said. There's no reason for me to join them. My only desire is to be here with you when you deliver our children."

Alyssa sighed. "You're right. I knew you wouldn't go. I know the temptation is there though. You've been looking for Sam's sister for nearly six years. It must be disappointing not to be in on the chase when you finally have a real lead to follow."

"However, the bigger disappointment would be to leave you. Now," he said getting to his feet, "we'll let them back in here and we'll see about tracking down Samantha."

Alyssa nodded, knowing Blake needed to do this thing, not only for Sam, but also for himself. He'd worked too hard over the years attempting to locate her.

\* \* \* \*

Within minutes, the group gathered around Alyssa again, waiting to hear what Blake had to say. Cat knew there had to be a way to track Samantha now, instead of waiting for her call to come in.

"When was the last time you saw her?" asked Blake.

"It's been close to four months. She left on assignment to Kenya before I went to do some field research at Yellowstone National Park."

"What was her frame of mind?"

"Happy. Anxious to get on with the trip, I think. She loved going on safari. She said she got the most amazing shots of the wildlife and the inhabitants of the small villages she'd pass through."

"Did she leave a way for you to contact her?"

Catalina sighed, unaware that she was giving away her worst with a single sound—that she wouldn't hear from Samantha again. "Of course. We each have a satellite phone so we can keep in touch no matter where we are. But she said not to call it in case it's traced back to her." She stiffened her shoulders the second she'd notice them droop. She would be strong for her sister.

"Is she going to be calling you?"
"Yes, tomorrow."

\* \* \* \*

Alyssa grunted. Enough was enough. Her husband could grill someone with the best of them, but he had no idea he was causing Catalina pain. She needed a break. It was time for a little female intervention. "Blake, honey. Could you take me home now? You can talk to Catalina there. I'm sure she'd be more comfortable there and I know I certainly will."

Immediately, Blake sat next to his mate and ran his fingers through her hair in a tender caress, "Anything you want, baby." Blake turned to the Sebastian and Catalina. "You don't mind if we continue this up at my place, do you?"

Sebastian grabbed Catalina's hand before she could agree and shook his head. "We have a stop to make first. We'll be there right after."

Blake met Sebastian's eyes and nodded in agreement, then helped Alyssa to her feet.

\* \* \* \*

"It was nice to meet you, Alyssa," Catalina said and opened her arms to give Alyssa a hug. She could feel the babies kick against her own belly and wondered when she and Sebastian would have children. Maybe someday.

Catalina and Sebastian followed Blake and Alyssa out of the chamber and up the stairs where they said their goodbyes. Anxious to be on his way, Sebastian grasped Catalina's hand and started to drag her out of the store. They still had to pick Lobo back up from the kennel before heading back out of town.

"Hey! Wait a minute. I'm not some dog you have on a leash. Where are you hauling me?"

"I told you. It's a surprise."

Catalina came to a standstill, causing Sebastian to jerk on her arm. "Hey!"

"I'm sorry, Cat."

"Good, then you can make up for it by telling me what the surprise is."

"Not on your life. Besides, you have to see this surprise for yourself. And that's all I'm going to say," he added when she would have continued to argue. "The sooner we get to the car, the sooner we get to that surprise."

Catalina stared at him for a few seconds, and when he wouldn't budge, she gave a goodnatured shrug and skirted passed him. "What are you waiting for?" she called over her shoulder.

Sebastian shook his head and followed Catalina to the Jaguar. He walked over to the passenger side and opened the door for her before making his way to the driver's seat. "Buckle up. We'll be there in an hour or so."

\* \* \* \*

An hour later Sebastian pulled onto an overgrown trail that led into a thick grove of trees. For ten minutes, they'd followed the winding trail as it meandered up a gentle slope, passing through a

magical wonderland.

Catalina looked everywhere in awe, which pleased Sebastian more than he wanted to admit. Lobo was anxious to get out and run as he scratched at the rear window of the Jaguar. Sebastian knew just how he felt. It didn't help that fresh game was plentiful and the hunt was calling to them.

When he'd first come across this track of land, he'd known that this was his place. This was where he'd settle. He'd bought it on the spot, not knowing what was driving him, but driven all the same to have this place to call his own. He knew that one day he'd relocate here and now the time had finally come. Sebastian glanced over at Catalina, watching the sparkle in her eyes as she pressed her face against the glass.

"What is this place?" she gasped.

He could hear her excitement, feel her need to explore the trees, the bushes, to poke through the bramble and to chase the rabbits and deer. Sebastian's chest swelled with happiness. "This is our place. Our land."

Catalina snapped her head in his direction and zeroed in on him with a penetrating stare. "Ours?" she whispered. Her voice trailed off as she once again looked out the window. "Can we stop? I want to explore."

"Sure, but this isn't the whole surprise. We're

almost there now."

"Almost where?"

"You'll see," he teased.

With feigned aggravation, she huffed and sat back, only to jerk back up when a family of deer crossed right in front of the car. Two rabbits, a squirrel and a raccoon followed them. What was this, a crossing zone? In the middle of the forest? "Did you just see..."

Sebastian nodded, happy she was so enthralled with what was soon to be her new home. "Look up ahead."

\* \* \* \*

"Oh, wow." Standing atop a cliff stood a house. And not just any house. A house straight out of her dreams. It was a house unlike any other. Built in the Gothic Revival style, it looked like a storybook castle or an old English church. A steeply pitched roof, some pointed windows and some rounded ones, some with spokes and others with a four-leaf clover design. The house boasted battlements and towers, several imposing chimneys, and a widow's walk. It's the perfect place to watch the ocean below or the sky above.

Catalina scrambled out of the car as soon as it came to a stop. "This is ours?" she asked, unable to come up with anything else to say. She

practically bit off her tongue when she'd seen the house from a distance, but up close, it was everything she'd ever dreamed about and more.

She knew that Sebastian must have been dying to show her this from the moment they'd shown up at Alyssa's shop. Where did his self-control come from? If she'd had a surprise like this waiting for him, she didn't think she could have contained herself. "I know we don't have time to explore now, but we can come back, can't we?"

"Of course we have time. This is your home."

Like an excited child, Cat dashed to the front porch. "Where are the keys? I want to go in."

Sebastian laughed, "Right here, my love. You think I'd bring you out here and not show you your whole surprise?"

Catalina stuck out her tongue and hopped from foot to foot in her impatience. "Come on already."

Sebastian bounded up the steps behind her and dug the keys out of his jeans pocket. In less than thirty seconds, the door stood open and Cat was frozen in place, awed by the magnificence of the entryway.

Cathedral ceilings at least two stories high with wooden spires gave the entrance an almost ethereal, church-like feel. The light coming from the stained glass windows bathed the room in color and brilliance.

Beyond the entrance, she could make out

several doorways, all with arched overhangs. It was like looking at an old English abbey. Wooden floors glistened beneath her feet, obviously well cared for and waxed often. The whole house had a welcoming feel. Although calling such a place a house seemed like a sacrilege.

She could feel it welcoming her into its fold and knew in that moment that this was where she would spend the rest of her life. Spain had only been a place to spend time until she found where she belonged. She'd found it here, with Sebastian. Needing to clear the sappy thoughts from her mind, Cat asked a practical question. "How many bedrooms does this place have?"

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian thought about it a minute, calculating in his head, then answered mildly, "Well, there is the master bedroom, six guestrooms, the nursery and nanny's quarters. The nursery has three rooms so that makes it a total of eleven bedrooms."

"Good lord. Please tell me we can afford to have help come in to dust. There's no way I'm going to be able to keep up with this house by myself."

Sebastian chuckled, wrapped his arms around Catalina, and gave her a quick hug. "There's plenty of money for whatever help you'll need."

\* \* \* \*

Catalina sighed, in happiness and regret. It was time to go and she didn't want to leave. "We better go before I don't want to leave. I know if I step one foot beyond this entryway and see what lies beyond, you won't budge me for a week, and Blake and Alyssa are expecting us."

"As soon as we find your sister we'll come back and stay for a while."

Catalina ran back to Sebastian who was leaning against the doorframe, arms and legs crossed. She threw herself into his arms. "When did you find this place? How did you find it?"

"Blake knew I was looking for a place and he knew my love of architecture. He'd thought this place would call to me."

"But how did he hear about it?"

"I don't know. I never asked him. That's something we can ask him together. Speaking of which, we really should go."

Catalina went to get in the car and noticed that Lobo was gone. "Where's Lobo?"

"I let him out. I think he knows this is home now and wants to mark some territory."

"But we-"

"He'll be fine. We can't be lugging him all over the world while we search for your sister anyway, and there's plenty of game for him to hunt here. He'll be happy and we'll be back soon enough."

Catalina sighed. "You're right. Well, let's get going. I'm anxious to get this mystery solved and locate Samantha. Then I want a chance to explore my new home."

"You got that right," he growled as he backed out of the drive and headed down the winding trail.

It took them another two hours to get to Blake and Alyssa's new home. The drive had been relaxing, but Catalina knew her reprieve was over. She would be walking into the lion's den and nothing would stop Blake from getting the answers he needed. Not that she would have denied him those answers. She wanted her sister back unharmed, not off gallivanting around the world in an effort to stay two steps ahead of whoever was after her.

Catalina gasped as they pulled into the driveway. Set back from the road was the largest log cabin she'd ever seen. It stood three stories high and looked to be the length of a football field wide. What in the world do they need all that space for, she wondered.

Sebastian stepped out of the car and walked around to the passenger side, opening her door for her. With her gaze glued to the structure, Catalina made her way to the front porch, running her hands along the back of the rocking chair nearest the front door.

"What a beautiful home," she murmured. She could smell the freshness of the cedar shingles and hear the ocean in the distance. "What a glorious place to build a house," she said, turning toward Sebastian.

Sebastian nodded in agreement, then walked over to the front door, giving it a brisk knock before stepping back to Catalina and wrapping his arms around her. "They just had it built. He was still putting the final touches on it the last time I was here."

"It must have been a pure joy to build this place." Catalina looked up into Sebastian's eyes. "Did they design it themselves?"

"Of course. They wanted everything to be perfect before the babies arrived. They drove the contractor nuts with last minute changes."

"We didn't drive him nuts. We were just very picky as to what we wanted," interrupted Blake.

Catalina turned toward the door, startled. She hadn't heard the door open. By the twinkle in his eyes, it was obvious Sebastian had known that Blake was standing there all along and had just been egging Blake on.

"Come on in. Alyssa is in the back resting in the sunroom. Follow me."

Catalina reached for Sebastian's hand, needing his strength for what she was sure would be an emotional ordeal, before following in Blake's wake.

Sebastian gave her fingers a reassuring squeeze before bending down to whisper in her ear. "Everything will be all right. You'll see. We won't let anything happen to your sister."

They found Alyssa in the sunroom as Blake had promised, but she wasn't resting. Set in the far corner of the room was a worktable and bench, and from the looks of things, Alyssa was working on a unique garnet brooch in the shape of a dragon.

"What a gorgeous piece, Alyssa."

"Thanks. I woke up with the idea a few mornings ago and I can't seem to stop working on this. I just can't seem to get it right."

"So you don't have a buyer in mind yet?"

Alyssa looked up, startled by the open curiosity in Catalina's voice. "No, you have someone in mind?"

"Samantha is fascinated by dragons. She owns a collection of crystal dragons that she's collected since she was a teenager."

"Then consider this hers. Now from the impatient look on my husband's face, I better get to the couch and put my feet up."

"You're damn right. I thought I told you no

more working today?"

"Oh stuff a sock in it. I'm heading back to the couch." With just a bit of impatience and a lot of struggling, Alyssa made it to her feet and waddled over to the plush leather sofa that took up the center of the room. Three matching recliners completed the set.

Once everyone had seated themselves, Blake looked over at Sebastian as if to get his approval to continue the questioning he had begun in the shop earlier. Sebastian nodded and Blake turned his gaze to Catalina.

## Chapter Eight

ou mentioned earlier that Samantha would be calling tomorrow. Any idea what time she'll be calling?"

"No, her note just said she'd be calling Sunday. If you knew my sister, you'd know this was usual for her. We talk nearly every Sunday."

"You have a close relationship then?"

"We couldn't have a closer one. Samantha has been both mother and sister to me. Even my father when it called for it."

"So she could be running as much to protect you as running from whatever she's stumbled onto." It was a statement that didn't need an answer. They all knew the truth of his words.

"Can I ask you a question, Blake?"

"Of course, Catalina."

"How good are you? Can you really find her?" Before it's too late, she thought.

"I can find anyone. Have faith. She won't be alone much longer. And if she's in trouble, we'll get her out of it."

"I guess that's all I can ask." Feeling desperation the likes of which she'd never known, Catalina reached out mentally to her mate. What will I do if I lose her, Bastian?

It's too early to be worrying about what-ifs. She could be perfectly fine. All this fretting won't do you or your sister any good.

Catalina closed her eyes and nodded, then turned back toward Blake and Alyssa. "What's the next step? Do we wait for her call tomorrow and go from there?"

"We could do that, or we can do some good old-fashioned investigating while we wait," Blake responded.

"Believe me," Alyssa added, "there's one thing my husband is good at—besides loving me of course—and that's investigating."

Blake smiled at his wife, then went on with his explanation. "We have to assume that she's been setting up her return to her original ID for quite a while. She's probably using credit cards under that name in an effort to draw trouble away from you. The first thing we're going to do is run a credit check. Find out what cards she has and when and where she's used them."

"But all that will tell us is where she's been, not where she is."

"It may also tell us where she currently is.

Traveling to where she's been will possibly offer you clues as to where she is going. We'll put a trace on any card she has under both her identities so we'll know as soon as she makes a charge. Until you speak to your sister personally, there's nothing more we can do."

"On that note," chimed in Alyssa as she struggled to her feet, "why don't I order us some Chinese and we'll have a relaxing evening. You two are more than welcome to spend the night at our place tonight."

Sebastian turned to Catalina and knew she needed a break from the entire situation. "I think after dinner we're gonna head on back to our place and spend the night there."

Catalina reached for Sebastian's hand as she reached for his mind. *Thank you.\_Spending time in our new home is just what I need. Besides, I want to see Lobo.* 

I'd do anything for you. You know that. Now let's stop ignoring our hosts and figure out what we want to eat. Then we'll go home for the night.

That sounds like a wonderful plan. Cat turned toward Alyssa and Sebastian, smiled and asked, "What do you recommend?"

\* \* \* \*

By eight that evening Cat and Bastian were on

their way back to their place, if not content with the progress in the case, then content to be with each other. "Are any of the rooms habitable or will we be washing sheets and dusting before we head to bed?" Catalina asked.

Sebastian edged around the car in the next lane, glanced at Catalina, then returned his attention to the road ahead. "I have a maid service that comes in about once a week. They keep the pantry stocked, clean the bathrooms and the master bedroom in case I decide to stay here. This is my first night in the house as well."

Less than fifteen minutes later, they were driving up the wooded path that led to the house. By the time they pulled into the drive, Lobo was sitting outside the house waiting for them. "How did he know we were going to be here?" asked Sebastian.

"Like I told you in Spain, he always seems to know when I'm home and is there to greet me."

"I think he has no plans to sleep outdoors tonight."

"You're right. He's entirely too spoiled. He usually sleeps on the floor at the foot of my bed when we're home."

Seeing his family, Lobo raced from the porch straight at the Jaguar. He yipped excitedly as they got out of the car. He didn't stick by them for long, however, before he headed back onto the porch to await them, his butt planted firmly in front of the door. He made it plain that he expected to be inside.

They were halfway up the steps when Cat took Sebastian's hand and pulled him to a stop. He could see a question in her gaze, then determination as though she'd come to some decision.

"Make love to me tonight, Sebastian. I need you."

As Sebastian unlocked the door, he glanced over at Catalina. "Are you sure, baby? You're not too sore? I was pretty rough on you last night."

"I need to feel you close to me, inside of me. I need to know that even if I never see my sister again, I'll still have you."

"You don't have to worry about that. I'm not going anywhere. You just relax in a hot tub and let your worries float away while I make sure our bedroom is ready, okay?"

\* \* \* \*

They found the master's chambers on the second floor, in a wing all its own. There was a sitting room large enough to hold a football team, a library that housed at least a couple of thousand books, a bathroom that would make a sultan proud and a bedroom both large and beautiful enough to befit a king and his queen.

Catalina was speechless. How is it that she, who came from a humble background, was now living in a place like this? Her little house in Spain would fit in the sitting room of the master's suite. Was she ready for this? Obviously, Sebastian's family came from money. How in the world would she ever fit in?

"Whatever you're fretting about, stop," reprimanded Sebastian.

"How'd you know I was worrying again?"

"Besides the fact that I can feel your anxiety, you get lines on your forehead when you're thinking too hard. Now off to the bath while I prepare the bedroom."

Catalina smiled weakly at Bastian, then headed through the double doors that led to the bathroom. Maybe a long soak in the giant claw foot tub would do her some good. *It's so decadent in here, I feel like I should be drinking champagne*. She filled the tub and stripped quickly.

I can arrange it. All it would take is a quick trip down to the wine cellar.

You have to be kidding. This place has a wine cellar? Of course. Would you like me to go get some?

*No, it's just a stupid fantasy.* She sighed, then slid lower into the tub of hot water.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian only had to think about it for two seconds. He'd make her every fantasy come true if he could. This one would be simple to do. Ten minutes later he walked into the bathroom carrying a flute of champagne with the bottle tucked under one arm.

"Oh, Sebastian, you didn't have to do this." But that didn't stop her from reaching for the champagne.

Sebastian inwardly chuckled. His little mate was a contradiction, one he adored. Needing to be closer to her, he crouched next to the tub and ran his fingers through the water. "Yes, I did. It was your fantasy and I aim to see that your every fantasy, dream and wish comes true from now on."

"You're too good to be true."

"And don't you forget it," Bastian said as he stood and made his way back to the bedroom. Catalina wouldn't forget this night.

In minutes, the room was awash in the ambient glow of candlelight. It flickered off the walls, sparkled in the stained glass windows and glowed against the cherry wood of the four-poster bed. Another bottle of champagne stood chilling in a wine bucket and fresh strawberries sat on the bedside table. The only thing missing was Catalina.

Well, if she wouldn't come to him, he would go to her. Maybe she'd like her back—and anything else he could reach—washed.

Catalina was immersed in bubbles when he reentered the bathroom. She turned her head toward the door the second she heard it open. "Are you coming in to join me?"

"As a matter of fact, I realized when I was in here earlier that there is plenty of room for two in that big old tub. There's no reason for you to feel lonely, now is there?"

Lifting her veiled gaze to his, Catalina answered, her voice husky and oozing with sexuality, "No, there isn't a reason to be lonely. Join me."

He knew she wasn't talking only about joining her in her bath, but about joining their bodies, too. His cock stood at immediate attention with her blatant come on. In an attempt to draw out the seduction, he slowly lowered his zipper while toeing off his sneakers. He could feel his mate's attention, her regard and her lust. They beat at him without mercy.

Seconds later, he shed his pants, then pulled his T-shirt over his head, tossing it to the floor amongst the rest of his scattered belongings. He could feel Cat's burning gaze roam his body and felt both pride and embarrassment. She was looking at him as if she wanted to eat him for both

dinner and dessert. How did he get to be so lucky? Feeling exposed, he slid into the tub, pulling Cat's feet onto his lap. "This is nice," he moaned as Cat's toes began to stroke his cock beneath the water.

\* \* \* \*

"It is, isn't it?" Catalina smirked. Last night he had been the aggressor. Today she was determined to turn the tables. Last night she'd been an innocent. Today she was a married woman with a man to satisfy. She couldn't wait to begin.

With a casualness she didn't feel, Catalina continued to stroke her mate from beneath the water, running her toes up and down his thickening cock. "Is there something wrong, Sebastian? You're breathing awfully heavy right now."

"Not a thing," he croaked.

"Good. I wouldn't want you to strain yourself in any way. I have plans for you tonight."

"Plans?"

"Yes, plans. The way I see it, you got to have your wicked way with me last night. I figure turnabout is fair play. Don't you?"

"Uhhh...you plan on having your wicked way with me then?"

"Oh, you betcha. That okay with you?"

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian pretended to think about it for all of thirty seconds, then gave Catalina a wide smile and a sexy wink. "That's okay with me. Do you think you can handle the role of seductress?"

"I can handle anything I put my mind to."

"It's not your mind I hope you'll be putting to use."

Catalina laughed and splashed Sebastian with a wave of water that left him sputtering. If she wanted to be in charge of their love play, then he was all for it—the first time they made love anyway. Then all bets were off. He had to admit, it was hard to think about the rest of the evening ahead when she was working her magic on him. Time to fight fire with fire.

"You know, Cat, they say that the feet are erogenous zones." Slowly, he began to rub her arches, her toes and the balls of her feet until Catalina was moaning in the tub right along with him. He wouldn't be surprised if steam started to rise off the surface of the soapy water.

Within moments, he decided he'd made the wrong choice in baiting Catalina. She was driving him insane with her toes. She'd decided to sit up in the tub, exposing her luscious breasts to his view as they bobbed above the water.

"Are you about ready to get out, baby?" asked Sebastian. If he didn't get out of the tub fast, he just might lose it.

"Aren't you going to wash my back?"

Sebastian looked up at Cat and caught the gleam in her eyes. Oh yes, she knew exactly what she was doing. "Sure, I'll scrub your back. Turn around." Instead of simply turning around in the tub, she stood, letting the water sluice off her body. Then she walked the two steps it took to stand in front of him, turned around and lowered herself onto his lap. *Dear God, she's trying to drive me insane*. "Ummm, what are you doing, baby?"

"Letting you wash my back, of course."

He didn't buy her innocent act. She was far too quickly becoming a siren. She knew what she wanted and, apparently, it was him and she wanted him now. "How about if I do this instead?" he asked as he lifted her by the waist and slowly lowered her onto his engorged cock. She was so wet and tight, fitting him so perfectly. She felt amazing wrapped around him, he had no desire to move, but she had other ideas.

As though they'd made love in this position a million times, she rode him with both an ease and enthusiasm that made him shudder with joy. Her slow and steady movements were killing him. Taking her by the waist, Sebastian took over the pace, thrusting into her on every downward

stroke of her hips.

Soon neither was satisfied with the restricted loving. They wanted to touch and be touched, to explore each other with hands, mouths and tongues. With great reluctance, Sebastian eased himself from Cat's body and stood with her in his arms. "I think it's time we retired, don't you?" he asked, his voice husky with need.

"I think you might be right about that."

Instead of letting go of his neck and placing her feet on the floor, she turned in his arms like an agile cat and wrapped her legs around his waist. Yes, she is definitely trying to kill me. How much patience did she think he had? He could only take so much teasing, so much stimulation. "For God sake's, Cat, you're killing me!"

"Oh, my handsome man, you haven't begun to see anything yet. I plan to make exhausted to the point where you'll sleep like a pup. In fact, I guarantee we'll both be so busy loving each other neither one of us will be thinking about anything else for the rest of the night."

\* \* \* \*

Catalina was enjoying herself beyond measure. She loved seeing her mate lose all control. She could feel him shuddering beneath her. His cock was hard and throbbing against her legs. Cat smiled inwardly. This is going to be fun.

Every time his gaze met hers, her heart turned over. He was looking at her with such love and tenderness it was almost enough to stop her heart from beating. She imagined his arms wrapping her in his embrace and it was enough to make her pulse pound and her tummy tingle with excitement. "Take me to bed," she demanded. She wasn't about to prolong this first bout of lovemaking. She wanted it intense and she wanted it now.

"Your wish is my command."

Sebastian carried Catalina through the double doors and back into the bedroom. The candles had burned down to nubs, the ice in the wine bucket was half-melted, but neither one of them cared.

Very carefully, he laid her on the bed. She swallowed tightly as he dropped down next to her. A delightful shiver of want ran through her as she let her eyes roam over his hard muscled body. He was even more stunningly virile than she remembered. If it were possible, he was even more gorgeous today. How did she get so lucky? She'd found a man of honor, compassion and good looks, too.

He pulled her roughly, almost violently toward him, yet one large hand cradled her face and held it gently. The touch of his hand was almost unbearable in its tenderness. She loved him more in that moment than she'd thought possible to love anyone.

With such overwhelming love washing through her, Cat did the only thing she could. She pinned her mate and mounted him in one smooth motion.

Taking Sebastian's face in her hands, she made sure to keep eye contact with him as she slowly began her ride. She could feel Bastian's frustration through their bond. He wanted her to speed up, to take him deeper.

Eventually he took the choice out of her hands and grasped her by the waist, lifting her to meet his strokes. Within minutes, they were racing for the stars. He took her mouth with savage intensity just as they reached climax and the world exploded around them.

Throughout the night, they woke often, each time to make love and lie in each other's arms. The sound of a ringing telephone at the foot of the bed early the next morning brought the pair abruptly back to reality.

## Chapter Nine

Catalina jerked upright when the telephone began to ring. She disentangled her body from Sebastian's and rolled off the bed, diving for her purse in the process. Overall, it took less than thirty seconds for her to retrieve her cell phone.

Sebastian looked on, bemused, at the speed she could move when motivated.

"Hello?"

Sebastian could hear the fear, the worry in her voice. Her feelings were washing over him in waves. He edged to the bottom of the bed so she'd know he was there for her.

"Lina?"

"Oh, thank god, it's you, Samantha."

"Are you with your mate?"

"Yes, look, some things have happened."

"I know. Listen to me. I only have a minute before I have to go. Do not leave your mate's side. Not for any reason."

Catalina paused before answering, unsure

where Samantha's worry was coming from. "You have my word. Can you tell me anything about what's going on?"

"No, it's better that you're left in the dark for now. You gave the photos to my brother, didn't you?"

"Yes, he's looking them over."

"Good, he'll see what he needs to see."

"Take care, sis. Promise me you'll take care of yourself."

"I will..."

"Samantha? Sis, are you there?"

Sebastian eased the silent phone out of her hand. "It could just be that she was disconnected."

"Or it could be that she's in trouble."

"Let's not worry unless or until we have to."

"You don't understand. I know she's in trouble."

"Then it's time we got ourselves together and went to Blake's. While you're getting ready, I'll call Blake and let him know we're on our way. Now get a move on. I have a feeling it's going to be a long day."

After Cat closed the double doors of the bath behind her, Sebastian got his cell phone out and made a couple of calls. He dialed Sam first as this involved his sister. It only made it to the second ring before being answered.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Elizabeth . Is Sam around?"

"Do you have news?"

"Well, an update anyway."

"I'll get him. He's in with the twins."

"Thanks."

After a short pause, Sebastian could hear Beth transfer the phone to Sam.

"This is Sam."

"Hi, Sam. It's Sebastian.

"Did you hear from Samantha?"

"Yeah, you could say that. But something interrupted her call. Cat believes she's on the run again." Sebastian sat on the edge of the bed and looked toward the bathroom doors. "I believe her, Sam. Your sister is in serious trouble and I'm afraid we're going to be too late."

"All you can do is your best. I'd be out helping you, but with the boys still so young, I can't leave my family unprotected."

"No one doubts your sincerity in finding your sister, Sam." Sebastian rubbed his forehead, conscious of time passing. He needed to end this call and get a hold of Blake before Catalina got out of the shower. "I'll give you regular updates until we have your sister back amongst us."

"I know. May luck be with you."

Sebastian disconnected the call and immediately dialed Blake. He must have been waiting on the call because he answered on the first ring.

"Morning, Sebastian. I take it Catalina received her call this morning?"

"You could say that. The call got cut off abruptly. Cat is convinced, and so am I, that someone or something forced Samantha to run. The situation has gone from relatively stable to critical with a single phone call."

"Understood. When will you be here?"

"We'll be leaving here within the hour." Sebastian once again glanced toward he bathroom doors. He'd love to be in the shower with Catalina instead of sitting out here talking on the phone.

"Well, we'll see you when you get here."

After ending the call, Sebastian strode toward the bathroom, intent on sharing the shower with Catalina. Unfortunately, she was already drying off when he walked through the doors. "Damn and I really wanted to wash your back."

She smiled, then winked, though Sebastian could tell the smile didn't reach her eyes. "I thought for sure you'd be in here sooner. Did your phone call go all right?"

"It went fine, just took longer than I thought it would. And you take quick showers," said Sebastian, pouting.

"I figured we'd need to get to Blake's as soon as possible. Why don't you hop in the shower while I blow dry my hair and get dressed."

"You're right. We need to get moving. I wanted

to tell you something first. I love you. Just so you know." Sebastian took her silence as a good sign and walked into the shower stall. She was still standing there with her mouth open when he turned to face her, the water pouring down his body.

They arrived at Blake's at noon, ready to strategize. "You think he had time to run the credit card check last night?" asked Catalina.

"I'm sure of it. He's been looking for your sister for nearly six years. He'll do anything to find her so don't you worry about that."

"What would I do without you?" she asked as she stepped onto Blake's porch.

After ringing the bell, Sebastian wrapped his arm around her waist. "You'll never have to find out and that's a promise."

"And what are you promising now?" asked Alyssa as she opened the door for them.

"Just my undying devotion."

"As you should. Come on. Blake's been on his computer all morning. He's waiting for you in his study."

Just as Alyssa was closing the door, someone stuck a booted foot into the gap. "I'd recognize that boot anywhere," shouted Sebastian, obvious happiness in his voice.

Alyssa stepped back and allowed Jackson

Daniels in. "Hi, Doc. I assume it's time for my appointment?"

"Since your due date is fast approaching, I'm here to make sure they are nice and healthy."

Sebastian moved forward to greet Jack and introduce Cat. "Jack, I want you to meet my mate, Catalina. Catalina, this is our people's head doctor, my brother-in-law, Jackson Daniels."

Catalina edged closer to the tall longhaired man and held out her hand. "It's wonderful to meet you."

"Same here. He's been such a lonely grouch. Maybe now he'll live a little," chuckled Jack. "So," Jack turned to Alyssa, "let's have a look at those babies, shall we?"

"Sure. You know your way back to the den, Sebastian." She started to walk away and Sebastian could hear her talking to Jack. "I want these babies out as much as they apparently want to stay in."

"Come on, this way, baby." Sebastian led her down the long hallway that led to the den and stopped in front of a half closed door. "Hey, Blake. Are you decent in there?"

"Very funny. Come on in." After the pair entered the office, Blake asked, "Did I hear Jack?"

"Yeah, he's in with your mate now."

"Good. Now, about Samantha. There's been a charge on your sister's credit card. She's staying in a hotel in Lucerne, Switzerland, the Astoria."

Catalina gasped. "Then that's where we need to go."

"I had a feeling you'd say that. Your plane is fueled and ready at the airport. So you can go whenever you're ready."

"Thanks for looking into this for us," Sebastian said. He reached back and grasped Catalina's hand. "Sorry we can't stick around, but we have a plane to catch."

"Understood. Besides, I have a feeling I'll be a father sometime in the next day or so. I want to concentrate on that."

The flight to Switzerland was long and exhausting. Both Sebastian and Catalina knew they needed sleep before heading out to meet with Samantha. After a short nap and feeling refreshed, they headed to the Astoria in Lucerne.

They carefully scanned the hotel lobby, looking for anything out of the ordinary. Holding hands, they made their way to the reception desk.

"Hi, we're looking for Samantha Woods. She called and said she was staying here." Catalina couldn't keep the excitement out of her voice. They'd finally found her. Samantha would be safe from the monsters that had invaded their home and butchered poor Dolly while she slept in her stall.

The older Swiss man stood with rigid formality as he checked his computer for Samantha's room number. Catalina couldn't help but wonder if he ever cut loose, or if he wore the bowtie even after business hours.

"I'm sorry, but she checked out about three hours ago. You know, this is the second query I've had about Ms. Woods. As I recall, she was in rather a hurry when she left here this morning."

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian could feel Catalina tense as she took the blow. Disappointment rolled off her in waves. "Did she leave a forwarding address? Or a letter, perhaps?" Sebastian asked the clerk.

"No, sir. Only that she had to leave and she'd had a wonderful stay. But you would think in her condition, she'd have been prevented from traveling."

"What do you mean in her condition?" Catalina squeaked. "She isn't hurt, is she?"

"I didn't mean to alarm you. I mean, this far in her pregnancy, of course. It looked like she was due to deliver any day."

"Oh, of course. Well, thank you for your help."

"My pleasure. And do tell Ms. Woods good luck with the baby."

"We sure will. Just as soon as we catch up with

her." Sebastian took Catalina by the hand and led her outside the hotel in to a tiny courtyard hidden from the street by a low wall and high bushes.

When he was sure she'd gotten her bearings back, they'd head for the plane and check out the next location where Samantha had charged hotel reservations. It was a long shot, but maybe she'd be there. A baby... He couldn't wrap his mind around it.

Sebastian didn't sense their presence until it was too late. He should have known that they'd trace Cat's phone as well. Five men jumped out from behind the bushes. Sebastian realized the outcome was grim. They didn't even have time to shift into their wolf forms. But neither did their attackers. Four wolves and a cat anyway.

He recognized their scents. These same men had trod upon their hiding spot in Catalina's barn last week. They were all built like linebackers except for the cat who looked like he could do ten rounds in the ring against Muhammad Ali.

He had no time left for introspection as the attackers surrounded them. Only their strength and the luck of the gods could save them now. The Were-cat lunged for Catalina, but she quickly sidestepped him, sending him tumbling to the ground. He pounced back up in less than a second. Catalina swiped at the Were-wolves crowding her, but was unable to deflect the one

who had taken a hold of her leg, rending and tearing it to pieces with his hands.

Catalina fell to the ground with a cry of agony and Sebastian lost control of the beast within. He leapt into the fray, pulling the Were-wolves off his fallen mate, tossing them into the street. He was waging a war for Catalina's life and nothing would stop him from destroying those that would hurt her.

So lost in his own frenzy, he didn't notice the Were-cat slink behind him. All he felt was pain as claws raked down his back. Blood seeped through his shirt and ran down his back in rivulets. He turned and grabbed the Were-cat by the back of his neck, tossing him over his shoulder onto the ground in front of him. One by one, he used his hands, fingernails and fists to work through the group of attackers, tossing them aside as mere trash to make his way to Catalina.

Catalina moaned and it was the last straw for Sebastian. With absolute menace, he turned to the group of Weres struggling to rise to their feet and stepped forward. As one, the group turned tail and made their escape, knowing he wouldn't leave his injured mate to chase after them.

Sebastian squatted down by Catalina's side and gently rolled her over onto her back so he could examine her wounds. Her leg was in terrible shape. Blood was everywhere. On his hands, his clothes, pooling on the cobblestones beneath Catalina's prone body. He couldn't make it stop. She was bleeding out and there wasn't a damn thing he could do to stop it other than apply a tourniquet to slow the bleeding down.

Once he got her back on the plane, he'd be able to see just how bad her injuries were. But he had to get her there safely first. Their enemies could still be around, lurking in the area, waiting for a second chance to finish them off.

Helplessness struck at his heart. He wasn't used to having to back down from a fight. Knowing that they meant to kill him and Catalina didn't make it any easier. Somehow, once he realized she needed him, he was able to leash the best within and stay by her side. He wanted to howl out his rage, his hatred. He needed to discover who was behind these attacks and why. It would wait.

Everything would wait until Catalina healed, and she would heal. There was no way he'd allow otherwise. He would not leave her side until he knew that she would be fine. Even then, he wasn't sure if he could leave her to track down these would-be assassins.

The wolf that had attacked his mate had made a costly mistake by running off without insuring he and Catalina were dead. He'd find out who those wolves were and if he couldn't, Blake would discover the answers to this mystery.

There wasn't a chance in hell that he'd let the traitors go unpunished. Obviously, there were still those amongst their kind that had sold their souls along the way. Sam needed to know about this latest treachery. First, however, he had to take care of Catalina.

Still protectively hovering over her in case the culprits came back, Sebastian pulled out his cell phone and called the flight attendant stationed on the plane to come pick them up. Now, all they could do was wait for their ride. Wait and pray the damage to Cat's leg wasn't as severe as it looked.

\* \* \* \*

How could she not have known? Even with the pain, she felt that single thought keep ringing through her head. How could she not have known that her own sister was heavily pregnant? Why hadn't Samantha told her? And when was she due?

Too many questions and zero answers. The pain in her leg was becoming unbearable like a fire racing through bone and blood. Her leg was a mangled mess. How in the hell was this going to heal? That it hadn't been torn completely off during the initial attack was sheer luck.

Other parts of her body had injuries and bled, but she could feel her body fighting to heal those wounds. She didn't think even the recuperative powers of a Were-wolf and a blood transfusion could help save her leg, though. All she could do was hope and pray.

She knew they were on the plane because she could feel the feather softness of the bed beneath her. How did they get here unseen?

## Chapter Ten

Sebastian walked into the bedroom carrying a red gym bag. When he noticed that her eyes were open, he dropped it to the floor and rushed to her side. "Are you okay? Are you in a lot of pain?"

Catalina tried to smile, but the tears that leaked from her eyes were a dead giveaway that she wasn't fine. That she wouldn't ever be fine again. "Why didn't Samantha tell me, Bastian? Why? Women get pregnant and have babies on their own all the time? How could she keep this from me?"

"Maybe she was humiliated at winding up pregnant and alone? Maybe she isn't pregnant by choice and didn't know how to tell you. You need to give her the benefit of the doubt when we finally catch up with her, sweetheart."

Catalina shuddered as a fresh wave of pain washed over her. Sebastian was firmly entrenched in her mind, trying to shoulder some of the pain. But it wasn't much of a help to her. He was going to have to sedate her for the trip back to the states. It was the only way she wouldn't suffer during the long hours of the journey.

He looked down at the mangled mess, at all the blood oozing from her wounded leg. She would need a transfusion at the very least, but he didn't know how she was going to survive the trip.

He'd already called ahead and Jack would be waiting for them with an ambulance at the Newark Airport when they arrived. But would it be too little, too late to save her life? Sebastian prayed that'd she'd make it through the next few hours, then they'd deal with whatever the ramifications of her injury were.

Sebastian reached down and picked up the bag he'd carelessly dropped and rummaged through it until he found the Ketamine he kept for just this type of emergency. A large enough dose would sedate their kind, but too large could put her in a coma, letting her slip away in her sleep. "I'm going to give you something for the pain now, Cat. It should help you relax. You mustn't fidget during the flight or you could hurt yourself more."

"Do whatever you have to, Bastian. I trust you, and to tell you the truth, I want to forget the past hour happened. Just for a little while. And the pain sucks, too. Go ahead and knock me out."

Sebastian filled the syringe and slowly emptied the contents into the IV he'd started the moment they'd reached the plane. Within seconds, Catalina's eyes began to droop and he could feel her mind slowly sink into oblivion. Without her fear and worry over her sister, it would be easier for him to shoulder her physical pain and still fly the plane.

He'd have his flight attendant check on her every fifteen minutes to make sure Catalina wasn't moving or bleeding through the dressing he applied to her leg. While he was in the pilot seat, someone else would need to care for her and the thought rankled.

He made the trip to the cabin at least a couple dozen times, putting the plane on autopilot so he could check on her. Each time, he needed to change the dressing. Red streaks were climbing up her thigh and the wound began to smell putrid. Was gangrene setting in?

Sebastian's worry only increased as he flew them back to New Jersey where Jack was waiting for them. He moved landed the plane only long enough to refuel before setting off again. He couldn't sleep while Catalina lay next to him dying. Through the long hours of the night, he prayed for his mate.

\* \* \* \*

Sixteen hours later, Jack examined Catalina's mangled leg and shook his head. His eyes were filled with sadness and his face grim when he met Sebastian's gaze. "I can't heal this, Sebastian. There is too much damage."

"What about the Were-bears? Can they do anything?"

"I don't know, but Cerridwen may be able to do something. You know she's a healer. She uses magic when there is no medical way to treat a wound or illness."

"Aren't they in Alaska?"

"No, thank God. It would take too long to get them here if they were. They're in New Orleans, visiting Cerridwen's old pack. It should only take a few hours to get them here."

Sebastian swallowed. "Does she have a few hours?"

"I don't know," Jack answered. "I really don't know."

Sebastian nodded and let the tears flow from his eyes. Thank God Catalina had slept soundly. She didn't need to overhear this conversation. The thought of losing her was too much for him to bear.

"Let me go make that call," Jack whispered.

"Hello?"

"Keenan. It's good to hear your voice. Is Cerri

with you?"

"Hey, Jack. No, actually, she's making rounds at the village. I'm squatting at Dare's place for the moment."

"You have any way to get a hold of her? We have a medical emergency here, and I don't know how long Catalina is going to last without some magical healing."

"Catalina?"

"Oh yes, you don't know, do you? Sebastian found his mate and they were in a bit of a scuffle. Catalina may lose her leg or her life. Neither option appeals to me. Can you guys come?"

"We'll hop on the jet as soon as Cerri gets back. Are you still staying at Blake and Alyssa's place?"

"Yes, until are strong enough to survive on their own, I will be. It'll probably another six or seven weeks."

"We'll be there as soon as possible."

When Jack returned to the room, Sebastian was cuddling Catalina to his chest, careful not to touch her mangled leg. At this point Sebastian needed as much care as Catalina.

He wondered what it was to feel such intense emotion about a person. To know that without her, you'd be a shell of a man. Incomplete in a way you'd never be able to fill again.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian was in agony. He should have been better able to protect her. They should have known that Cat's phone was just as likely to be tapped as her sister's. How nonchalant they had been and look where it had gotten them. He would find the bastard that did this to her and exterminate him.

Sebastian carefully eased Catalina back to the bed, careful not to jostle her. He didn't want her to awaken and feel the pain radiating from him. Because of their bond, he was doing his best to shield her from it. He felt the numbness, the hollow phantom pain as though her leg were already gone. What would they do if Cerri couldn't help them? How would Catalina cope? He'd love her no matter what condition she was in. But what would this do to her spirit?

Enough worrying. She'll pull through. Cerri won't fail. All that matters is that you're there for her when she wakes up.

With that brief lecture firmly entrenched in his mind, he pulled up a chair next to the bed and gripped her hand in his. For now, all he could do was continue bleeding the pain into himself and wait.

An hour later, Catalina began to stir. She moaned, as a grimace spread across her face. But there was nothing more Sebastian could do. The pain was becoming worse as the infection spread through her body. They were running out of time. Even with the IV drip full of antibiotics, Cat was losing her battle.

\* \* \* \*

Several hours later, Cerri and Keenan arrived. Each looked as though they were ready to fight a battle to the death. Cerri's usually smiling face was set in stern lines and Keenan's normally relaxed stance was rigid as he towered over Cerri protectively.

Stiffening her spine, she made her way over to Cat's bed where a pale and ethereal blonde sprite lay nestled beneath the covers. Gently, so not to awaken her, she moved the covers from the injured leg.

She took one look at it and shuddered. It would take a lot of magic to heal it. Magic she wasn't sure she had enough of. As though reading her thoughts, Keenan took hold of her hand and merged his powers with hers.

Centering herself, Cerri used all her power to move her healing energy from her body into Catalina's. Her palms heated and a yellow glow encircled her wrists as she gently ran her fingertips up Cat's injured leg.

Slowly, from the inside out, Cat's veins and

tissues began to mend, the wounds slowly started to close. Cerridwen swayed with weariness, yet she remained where she was. Sebastian was depending on her. Catalina was depending on her. She would heal this injury as if it had never occurred. She refused to allow there to be any scar tissue.

With her healing abilities and Keenan's druidic powers, combined with Jack's antibiotics and the blood transfusion Catalina had just received, she should be as good as new. Only time and the gods knew what the outcome would be.

After an hour, Cerridwen backed up from her patient and sighed in relief. She'd done all she could. It was up to Catalina now.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian watched the whole procedure from Cat's side. When Cerri dropped onto the stool that Keenan placed beneath her, he asked the one question that kept ringing through his mind. "Are you a witch?"

Cerri smiled and shook her head. "I prefer to think of myself as a healer. Witch sounds so archaic, doesn't it?"

"Well, whatever you call yourself, I consider myself indebted to you. If you're ever in need of aide, just call me and I'll have the jet in the air in less than an hour."

Cerri nodded, then lowered her head to her chest in obvious exhaustion.

Sebastian watched as Keenan gently ran his hands down her hair, her back in an intimate gesture. Although married, they still hadn't mated. Sebastian wondered what the holdup was, or should he say whom.

Sebastian looked down at his beloved mate and wished that Catalina would wake up. He needed to see her beautiful eyes, to feel her emotions pour through him, even if they were painful and disturbing. He knew that she thought her sister had betrayed their relationship by keeping her pregnancy secret. It was that, more than the pain, she could not bear.

\* \* \* \*

Catalina fidgeted in her bed. "For cripes sake, Jack, I'm not in prison. Let me out of this damn room. I'm going stir crazy here."

"No can do. You need to rest for at least another six hours. Your body has gone through a tremendous ordeal and needs time to recover."

"But I feel fine," she whined.

"Sorry, doctor's orders."

He didn't sound sorry to her in the least. She huffed and crossed her arms. "Well, fine then. In

six hours, I'm walking out of this room on my own two feet.

Jack nodded his agreement, put down her chart at the end of the bed and made his way out of the room just as Sebastian returned with a tray laden down with food.

"I thought you might be hungry. It's been quite a while since you've eaten."

"Now that you mention it, I'm starved. What's under all those covered dishes?" A sudden thought occurred to her. Horrified, she asked, "It isn't Jello or broth, is it?"

"Let's see." Slowly Sebastian began to uncover the dishes.

She saw pancakes with syrup, French toast, loads of bacon, some scrambled eggs, a couple of steaks and some French fries—a smorgasbord of her favorite foods. How had he known? He must have spent a lot of time running around her head when she'd been out of it.

"What tempts your palette, my lady wife?" Sebastian teased.

"I'll have a bit of everything. But let's start with that steak. I'm dying for some red meat."

"I imagine you are. Your body thrives on it, just as all of our people do. After the ordeal you've been through, I thought you'd be craving it by now."

"Thank you for thinking of this."

"Hell, what was there to think about? I was starving. I figured you'd have to be as well. So when is the doctor letting you out of here?"

She knew Sebastian was embarrassed so she let his comment go. "Not for another six hours."

"Good."

"You agree with him?"

"Sweetheart, I saw what condition you were in when we brought you here. If the doctor says you're to stay in bed, then that's what you're going to do."

Catalina sighed, knowing she couldn't budge her mate. Oh well, she might as well enjoy the time she was locked in here. "Pass me the French fries." She gobbled them down like a starving wolf and finished off her steak in no time. With breakfast eaten and the dishes cleared, Catalina set her plan in motion.

"Do you think I could bother you for a hug?" she asked, batting her eyelashes and drawing her lips into a pout. What man could resist such a plea? She'd have him just where she wanted him, in bed with her.

As he leaned closer to wrap his arms around her, she took full advantage of her mate's vulnerable position and tugged him into the bed atop of her. Sebastian tried to jump up, but Catalina would have none of it.

What?" she purred. "Are you afraid to lay

down with me?" she asked in her most throaty voice.

"I'm afraid to lie on top of you. Your leg..."

"My leg is fine and right now I want to wrap both of them around your waist and hold tight. I need something to take my mind off the hurt I feel in my heart.

"I'm sorry, baby, but no can do. When I'm sure it's safe, nothing will stop me from loving you."

Catalina heaved a sigh, tightened her grip around the nape of his neck and tugged, bringing his mouth down to hers. If he was going to leave her frustrated, then he deserved to feel the same way.

She'd gotten so used to being with him, expressing her feelings and passions openly that it was killing her to keep her hands to herself.

With that in mind, she set out to kiss the living daylights out of her man. She lightly bit his lower lip, then eased the tiny hurt with her tongue as she demanded entry. What followed was a war of dominance, tongues dueled and passion flared. Her blood thickened and her heart beat loudly in her ears.

With great reluctance, she let her hands fall to her sides and lay back in bed, leaving Sebastian leaning over her, dazed and flushed. Good. Just the reaction she'd hoped for.

"Now, why don't you hunt up those miracle

workers that saved my leg and my life so I can thank them properly?" Although, what she really wanted to do was crawl inside his skin, but Sebastian didn't need to know that.

He did as asked.

The door cracked open as new visitors poked their heads through the opening. "Come on in," Cat called to them. Sebastian followed the pair into the room and closed the door behind him before once again taking his seat next to her.

Whoever Catalina had expected to see, it wasn't the tiny bird of a woman or the hulking bear of a man. These two were familiar to her. How small this world was or was this just a bit of clairvoyant magic weaved by her sister?

She'd seen this pair in a photograph Samantha had sent to her. Why hadn't she mentioned that these two could wield magic? Or had she sent those pictures knowing that Cat would trust them based on her intervention?

The woman grinned as she approached the bed. Her grin was infectious and Catalina couldn't help but smile at her in return. The man, meanwhile, was somewhat stiff in his posture. He appeared very protective of Cerri. She hoped he didn't think she'd offend or mock Cerri's abilities. How could she mock such a miracle worker?

Cerri stopped at Catalina's beside and quickly moved the covers off the injured leg. From the look on her face, even she was amazed at the outcome.

"I wanted to say thank you. That goes for both of you. You helped to save not only my leg, but also my life. I know I was dying. Only thoughts of Sebastian kept me sane at times, even when he thought I was completely unaware of what was going on around me."

Sebastian sucked in his breath. "If I'd known you were still aware, I would have given you more drugs. I'm so sorry."

"If you'd given me more of that magic sleeping medicine, I wouldn't have had you as a lifeline, someone to cling to when the pain was overwhelming." She explained. "What's the prognosis, doc? Am I going to live?"

Cerri chuckled, her laugh musical, filling the small room with joy. "You're going to be fine. And it was our pleasure to help you."

Keenan rested his hands on Cerri's shoulders and gently massaged her muscles. They must have had a long night as well.

"Pull up a chair and rest. You must be exhausted."

## Chapter Eleven

They were on her trail again. She thought she'd lost them at the hotel in Lucerne, but she could feel them closing in on her. Every hour, the trail separating them grew narrower.

She could feel the baby move. She didn't know how she felt about this child, whether she should be happy she was bringing forth a child for their people—a child she knew had a destiny. Or whether she should hate this child as she hated the monster that had impregnated her.

Hopefully, she could come to terms with her feelings before the baby's birth. Just another couple of weeks if her calculations were correct and she'd be a mother. A mother to what, she didn't know. Would it be human or Were, or a combination of both? In fact, she didn't even know who the father was.

Her first week in Africa, she'd grown sick and had been forced to spend some time in an old fishing village. That's when she'd had a vision of a child, a boy, being born from her body. She'd known then that she was pregnant. She'd gone to Africa to escape her demons. Yet now, she was almost due to give birth.

Were they after her because of what she'd seen or the child she carried? All she knew was that she needed to stay one-step ahead of them until she could make it to her brother. It wasn't the right time yet to reunite with her brother. She'd know when it was.

Samantha walked faster through the airport. She needed to leave the country, move on to her next destination. She handed the airline employee her ticket and boarded the plane. This time she'd gotten away. But what about the next? Because she knew her destiny, as well, and it wouldn't happen until they'd captured her again. Only then would her destiny fully unfold.

\* \* \* \*

"Knock, Knock. You up for some company?" called Blake from the hallway. Sebastian glanced at Catalina and, at her nod, opened the door for Blake. "So tell us, how are mother and babies doing?"

Blake beamed at them, a very happy man. "The four of them are doing wonderfully. In fact, Alyssa would like to come in and show the triplets off. If that's okay with you?"

Catalina squealed. "Of course! Send them in. I'd go to her, but the docs say stay in bed just a little longer."

"We'll be back in a minute."

"I can't wait. Hurry back."

Sebastian had a feeling there was more to her desire to see the babies than she was letting on. What she was thinking about? Then it hit him, her sister was pregnant. If she couldn't share in that pregnancy then she'd live vicariously through Alyssa. It didn't matter that Alyssa had already given birth. It was the whole idea that somewhere out there Samantha might be in labor and have no one by her side. "We'll get to your sister. This I promise you. You will see each other again."

"I believe you, Bastian. I just don't know if we'll be in time."

Knowing she would see through empty platitudes, Sebastian kept his thoughts to himself. He also harbored doubts about whether they would get to Samantha in time to save her. Before he could think of reassurances to offer her, the door opened and in walked Blake, Alyssa and Jack, each cuddling a newborn.

"What are their names?" Catalina asked from the bed, her arms outstretched as though begging for a child to be placed there. He'd love to have her holding his child, their child. After they found Samantha, perhaps they could talk more about having a family of their own.

Beaming like the proud parent Sebastian knew her to be, Alyssa responded. "I'm holding Astra Marie. Blake is holding our son, Danaan Nicholas and Jack is cuddling Allie Elizabeth."

"What unique and beautiful names," reverently whispered Cat. "Can I hold one?"

"Are you sure you're up to it?" Sebastian worried

"I'll be out of this bed in a few hours. Besides, my arms are fine. It was my leg that was mangled."

Sebastian winced, "Do you have to put it like that? I may never get over that image as it is."

She looked over at him as if to say, *get over it already*, then held her arms out again for the baby.

When Alyssa placed Astra in Catalina's arms, Sebastian's heart kicked up a notch. Yes, they were definitely going to discuss having a family very soon. He couldn't wait to see her heavy with his child. To see the glow of pregnancy surround her, feel his unborn baby move beneath his hands as he rested them on her, hear his baby's first cry.

The thought of making Cat pregnant had his cock as hard as iron. He had to get his mind on something else before everyone in the room noticed the hard-on he sported. "Blake, what are the chances that Samantha will use her charge cards again?" Catalina looked his way, then

turned her attention back to the baby she held in her arms.

"She already has. In fact, she's gotten smarter. Samantha booked rooms in hotels in London, Madrid, Paris, Washington DC, and Venice. It's anyone's guess where she really is."

Catalina gasped. Her brows furrowed in worry.

Needing to offer comfort to her, Sebastian walked over to the side of the bed and ran his fingers through her hair. "We'll find her, Cat. Believe it, baby," he vowed. Turning his attention back to Blake, he asked, "What do you suggest we do now?"

Blake settled his son in the crook of his arm and pulled the little hat down further over Danaan's ears before answering. "I'm tracking airline flights looking for a female traveling alone in the twelve hour span before and after your attack in Lucerne."

"You think you'll find anything?"

"She'd want to get out of town as quickly as possible. A flight would be her safest bet, plus she'd be in a public place. She won't do anything stupid if she can help it. Not this late in the game."

"That's comforting," Catalina quipped.

"I'm sorry if that seems cruel. She's leading them away from you and trying to keep herself safe while carrying a child. She won't take unnecessary risks if she can help it." Catalina took Astra's tiny hand in hers, then looked up. "I know. I'm just worried."

Jack spoke up, "Try Venice first. She went there."

Sebastian looked at Jack, really looked at him, and for the first time, noticed how on edge he seemed.

"And you know this how?" asked Blake.

Sebastian wanted to know and he was sure Catalina was just as curious.

"I just know." With that said, Jack, still cuddling Allie, walked out of the room.

Sebastian had his own suspicions as to how Jack knew. If he was right, things were going to get a whole lot more interesting in the next few weeks. Lost in thought, he didn't realize that Cat had handed Astra back and Blake and Alyssa were getting ready to leave until he heard the babies begin to fuss.

Alyssa reached over with one hand and squeezed Cat's shoulder. "I'm sure you can't wait to get out of that bed, but you need your rest. You have a manhunt to conduct."

"Over my dead body," Sebastian bellowed.

"What do you mean by that?" Catalina asked.

"Uh-oh, we better let them talk this out," Blake told Alyssa as they quickly left the room with their children.

"I mean, you just suffered a terrible injury.

You're in no shape to go searching around the world. I won't allow it."

"You won't allow it?" she whispered.

Sebastian's head jerked up, hearing both fury and hurt in her voice. Oh, shit! He was in the doghouse now. "Look, baby, it's that I'm worried about you. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you."

"We take chances everyday just by being what we are. I need to be there for my sister. Can't you understand that?"

"I know, baby. Look, let's see what the next few hours bring, and then we'll discuss this again. Okay?"

"I'm going, Sebastian. There is nothing to discuss. If you want to make sure I stay safe, then let's take a group of Weres with us. But know this, I am going with you."

Sebastian knew a losing battle when he heard one. Besides Samantha had warned him to stay by Cat's side. He'd better get in touch with Sam and see about getting some extra manpower. "Fine. But we are not going to be traveling alone. I'm not letting them get the drop on us again."

"Fine. Now come over here and kiss me so I know you aren't mad at me."

"I doubt I could ever get truly mad at you," he said as he approached the side of the bed. "Scoot over, baby."

She quickly did as he asked. "Are you going to

kiss me or not? Or are you too chicken?"

"Hah, me, chicken? Not in a million years, baby. I just don't want to get you all hot and bothered and leave you frustrated."

"You leave me frustrated, you're a dead wolf."

Sebastian chuckled. "What? Are you going to neuter me?"

"Nah. But I'll come up with something diabolical to use against you."

Deciding it might be wise to change the subject, Sebastian nuzzled Cat's neck, inhaling her intoxicating scent. "You always smell so good. Why is that?"

She chuckled and moved her neck to the side to give him better access. "Must be the cucumbermelon bubble bath I use."

"Well, whatever you use, don't stop. You have no idea how much your scent turns me on." Just as he moved in for a kiss, someone knocked on the door. Frustrated beyond belief, Sebastian grunted and then eased away from Catalina. He stood and pushed his hands deep in his pockets, anything to hide the erection straining his jeans. "Come in," he called out.

Jack just barely stuck his head in the door. "I hear it might not be safe to come in, but I need to check on my patient and you have a phone call in the den, Sebastian."

"Sam?"

"Yes. Is it safe to intrude?"

"Sure." Bastian turned to Cat and winked. "I'll be right back, baby."

"Take your time. I know you have things to discuss. But I want all the details," she demanded, her eyebrows arched.

"Of course." After bending down and giving her a quick peck on the lips, he nodded at Jack and left the room. As soon as he closed the door behind him, he headed straight for the den. He had a favor to ask of Sam.

Blake was pacing in his office, his son cradled in his arms, talking into the speakerphone when Sebastian entered the room. "Here he is, Sam."

"Good. Now tell me what in hell is going on."

Sebastian cleared his throat, then began to fill Sam in. "Immediately after our arrival at the hotel, we felt like we were being watched. We were attacked as soon as we left the hotel."

"Did you recognize them?"

"I recognized two of the men from the pictures Samantha took before she disappeared. They seemed to know who we were and what we were doing there. I think they were hoping we'd lead them to your sister."

"I just emailed the pictures to Blake. See if Keenan recognizes the two men that attacked you."

"Sure thing. I want Cat to rest another day or

two before we head back out again, but I have a request."

"I already know what you're going to ask. I have Rafe on standby. He'll be at Blake's place by tomorrow evening and Keenan has some men on the way. After this latest attack, I'd feel better if we send you en masse."

"Well, you better add one more person to the mix. Jack is going to insist on tagging along."

"I thought Cat was doing great after the healing session with Keenan and Cerri?"

"She's doing wonderfully. He won't be traveling with us as Cat's doctor, but as Samantha's, and I suspect he may be much more than just her doctor."

It didn't take Sam long to catch Sebastian's meaning. Even Blake looked up startled. "Mates?"

"Yes. And she's pregnant with another man's child. This isn't going to be easy on either of them."

"If what you suspect is true, then they definitely have challenges ahead of them. Tell Jack he can go along if he insists. I'll talk to Keenan about having him and his wife stay there. Is Blake still with you?"

"Yes, I'm right here."

"Does that sound okay to you?"

"That's fine. Alyssa and the babies are doing great and having another woman around will be a bonus for Alyssa while she's confined to the house."

"Great. Then expect Rafe tomorrow. Call me when you find out something."

"Will do."

"Sure thing."

Both men stopped and stared at each other, aware that by tomorrow everything could change for Sam and not for the better. For all they knew, Samantha could already be in enemy hands. "Did you find any lone females flying to Venice during the hours you specified, Blake

"I sure did. In fact, ten women traveled alone during those hours. And guess who had one of those seats? Samantha Woods. Seat 16B. Jack called it right."

"I had a feeling he would. I'm sure they're mates and he's known it or felt it since he met Sam. Speaking of Jack, he's in with Cat now. I better head back, make sure she's healing as she should be."

"Are you going to let him know he can go with you or are you going to make him demand it of you?"

"I don't know. I'll find out when I get back to our room. By the way, thanks for letting us bunk here. I know you have a full house, especially with Keenan and Cerri here as well."

"The more the merrier. Well, things should

definitely get interesting around here."

"You can say that again. Well, if I want the doc's report, I'd better head back."

"I'll catch up with you later. This little guy needs to be put down anyway and I'm sure his mom is missing him."

Sebastian nodded at Blake and headed back toward his room. He met Jack right outside the room. "How is she doing, doc?"

Jack smiled. "She's doing fabulous. I just officially released her from my care. She doesn't even have a scar."

"Great." Deciding to give the man a break, Sebastian added, "Sam and I discussed it. We decided that it might be wise to have a doc along. We don't know how far along Samantha is in her pregnancy. Or what condition she'll be in when we find her."

"Believe me, you couldn't keep me here if you tried."

"I had a feeling you'd say that. Welcome aboard. Now I'm gonna go check on my mate while you anticipate meeting yours."

Jack nodded, then sauntered off.

A sheer indication that his assumption had been correct—Samantha was Jack's mate. Sebastian shook his head and opened the bedroom door. What he saw when he entered the room nearly stopped his heart.

## Chapter Twelve

Catalina lay splayed before him, naked, on the king-sized bed. Jack was right, not a single scar marred her luscious body and he could see every inch of it. Sebastian was rooted to the spot, knowing that if he took but one step in her direction, it would be all over for him. Hell, who was he kidding? He was a goner already.

"Are you just going to stand there and stare at me or are you going to do something with the hard-on you've been walking around with all afternoon."

Sebastian swallowed thickly, then immediately pulled his T-shirt over his head and tossed it to the floor. What use were words when action would suit the situation better? He stalked toward the bed, toeing off his sneakers and unzipping his jeans along the way. Catalina looked on, wide-eyed, whether from shock or anticipation, he really didn't care. He wanted to make love to her, had wanted to for hours and nothing was going to

stop him now.

"Don't you think you should lock the door first?" Cat asked, her voice thick with tension.

Sebastian smiled, "I locked it the second I saw you lying in wait for me."

"Oh, well, good then."

Sebastian could smell her need as he approached the bed. Her scent calling to him, enticing him.

\* \* \* \*

Catalina's heart stuttered in her chest and a delicious shudder heated up her body. He was so stunningly gorgeous. All that muscle and sinew, moving in perfect rhythm as he stalked toward her, could give a woman heart problems. She couldn't tear her gaze away from his profile. In fact she had no desire to do so. He was all hers and she intended to revel in it.

She'd almost lost her life. Now she wanted to celebrate it with her mate. And what better way to rejoice life than by making love. She swallowed tightly as he dropped down next to her.

At the base of her throat, a pulse beat and swelled as though her heart had risen from its usual place. She moved toward him, compelled by her own passion. His sweetly intoxicating scent threatened to overwhelm her.

Gathering her into his arms, he held her snugly against him. She buried her face against the corded muscles of his chest, taking his scent deep into her lungs. She would know this man in the dark amongst a hundred men just by his scent.

His hands explored the hollows of her back, then skimmed her hips, her bottom, before sliding back up and cupping her face in his hands. He pressed his lips against hers, gently covering her mouth. His kiss was slow and sweet and then it changed. His tongue traced the soft fullness of her lips, then demanded entrance. The kiss sent the pit of her stomach into a wild swirl and her heart thudded in her ears.

He lifted his mouth from hers and gazed into her eyes. "I love you, baby." As though unable to help himself, his ran his lips searing a path down her neck, her shoulders, exploring her body with a thoroughness that astounded her.

"I love you, too, Sebastian. But if you don't make love to me soon I'm going to die."

"I am making love to you. Can't you tell?" he asked as his lips trailed lower. "If not, I must be doing something very wrong." His tongue encircled one nipple with tantalizing possessiveness, while his fingers trailed slowly across the other, bringing them both into hard peaks. He lifted his head long enough to ask, "Do you know how sweet you taste?"

She shook her head, mesmerized by the passion and honesty she heard in his voice. There was such love and devotion behind his words. It was impossible for him to hide his feelings from her and she felt blessed to be his mate.

His hand left her nipple and trailed down her tummy. His touch was light and painfully teasing as he continued to slowly explore her body. His ardor was surprisingly, touchingly, restrained yet there was no doubt that he was keeping himself tightly leashed.

He took her hands and placed them against his chest, encouraging her to explore his body as he explored hers. She couldn't have stopped herself from touching him if her life had depended upon it. She slid her hands down his chest as he moved to partially cover hers.

"Aren't you going to take off your jeans?" she asked, barely able to form a sentence since her mind was so passion laden. All she had to do was be in the same room with him and she wanted him with a desperation that knew no bounds.

"If I take off my jeans, I'll never last. And I want this to last a long, long time."

"Oh." Catalina didn't know what else to say. She could go on touching Sebastian and be touched by him forever.

Parting her lips, she raised herself to meet his kiss. His mouth covered hers hungrily, devouring her, as though he were trying to absorb her taste, her essence and draw it into himself.

She couldn't get enough of the feel of his skin beneath her hands. Her cheeks flamed under the heat of his gaze as her fingers slipped beneath the waistband of his jeans. She still felt uncertain at times while making love to Bastian. She wanted her every touch to bring him immeasurable pleasure.

\* \* \* \*

Her touch was driving him crazy. He didn't know how much longer he could last. The feel of her hand against his skin, just an inch from his cock, was killing him. He whispered his desires into her ear, felt her pulse skip and jump at his suggestions. She was ready for him and he was more than ready for her.

He eased himself away from her, stood and slowly lowered his jeans, dropping them to the floor. A sense of urgency drove him. He needed to be one with her now. He lowered himself over her and slid between her open thighs. His hands caressed the smooth skin of her legs, then explored the soft lines of her hips, her waist, her back and finally slid up her arms until he held her hands clasped in his. With a casualness he didn't feel, he took her hand and brought it to his cock.

"Take me into your body and make me yours," he pleaded.

"I have always been yours. Don't you know that?"

A knot formed in his throat, and all he could do was show her how much he loved her, would always love her. "Wrap your legs around my waist, baby, and guide me home."

\* \* \* \*

His lips brushed her nipples as he slowly filled her. Her body melted against his. He filled her world. His tormented groan was a heady invitation, so she lifted her hips, allowing him sink into her fully. This time she groaned. The feel of him inside her almost sent her over the edge and he had yet to move. She caressed the strong tendons in the back of his neck, then slid her hands down his back until she cupped the cheeks of his ass. "Move, Sebastian, before I do you serious bodily harm."

Before she'd finished her sentence, he slowly withdrew and thrust with such a force he brought her to an instant orgasm. Her eyes blurred, her heart pitched, and the room began to spin. "Jesus, don't stop," she said when it appeared he was perfectly content to sit there and watch her reaction.

"If I move now, it'll all be over. Your body gripping mine is more than I can handle."

Taking the decision out of his hands, she arched up, forcing him to shift inside her.

He lost all semblance of control then, taking her body with a forcefulness that left her gasping. "Oh, God," she cried as she felt another orgasm swell inside of her. As though he were waiting for just such a reaction, she felt him tighten and swell inside her.

"Come for me, baby. Now," he demanded.

As if she could do anything but what he asked. Waves of ecstasy washed through her. She lay drowning in a floodtide of warmth and contentment, of bone deep satisfaction as Sebastian followed her over the edge, flooding her with his cum.

Sebastian began to move away from her, but Cat would have none of that. Not yet. "Don't move."

"But I'm too heavy to be laying atop you like this, baby."

"I want to feel your skin against mine for a bit longer. I want this moment to last. Who knows when we'll have such peace again."

\* \* \* \*

"Oh, baby. I won't let anything happen to you

again." Sebastian slowly ran his fingers through her hair, finding enjoyment in the act. Simply touching her brought him deep pleasure. "Rafe Castillo, the leader of the Were-cats will be joining us the next time we leave, along with a couple of Keenan's men and Jack. We won't be outnumbered again."

"I know you won't let anything happen to me. It's you I'm worried about. I want someone guarding your back."

Her sweet words made his heart clench. She meant everything to him. He couldn't—wouldn't—lose her. And she wasn't about to lose him either. "I'm not going anywhere, baby. You're stuck with me."

"Promise?" she asked.

"I promise. We'll both be careful."

Sebastian eased off her then gently pulled her into his arms. Her head fit perfectly in the hollow between his shoulder and neck as though made specifically for him and he had no doubt she was.

Catalina's fingers trailed across his chest, teasing his nipples into hard peaks. His body hardened instantly, but he knew she needed rest. Slowly, he bent his head to hers and whispered in her ear, "Go to sleep, Cat. I'll be here when you wake up."

She nodded and after a few minutes, her breathing evened out. It felt so good just to hold her in his arms. Soon the exhaustion of the last couple of days caught up with him and he, too, fell asleep, his body wrapped around his mate.

\* \* \* \*

Samantha had been sitting in Harry's Bar when she'd first felt their approach. She'd already scoped out the place earlier and knew she could get lost in the crowd that filled the place. It's why she'd chosen to eat her meal here.

As casually as she could, she dropped some money on the table and eased into the crowd. As if sensing her distress, the baby began to kick inside of her. She placed a hand upon her stomach and willed her child to calm. She wouldn't allow anyone to harm him.

During the last few days of running she'd come to terms with her pregnancy. Her child wasn't at fault for what had happened to her. She would give him all the love and support she could. She figured she'd have another week at most before her son would be born. That didn't leave her much time to lose the men on her trail. If she could lose them. Her visions always showed her capture, but nothing beyond that.

Easing her way through the crowd, Samantha made her way to the entrance, always keeping her eye out for the men she'd seen on several occasions. Why couldn't she spot them? They must be outside waiting on her to come to them. Not bloody likely, she thought.

Instead, she made her way back to the bar to speak with the bartender. He spoke a little English so she was able to tell him about the two men waiting for her outside. Immediately he called the local police.

Seven minutes later, she heard the sirens approaching, and just as quickly felt the men fade from her mind. They were being cautious not to get caught. Whoever was pulling their string must be a powerful man. He obviously didn't want any publicity involved with her disappearance. Hopefully, she could use that to her advantage.

She quickly slipped out of the bar and hailed a taxi. Within an hour, she had cleared out her room, except for the clue she left her sister taped beneath the bottom of one of the dresser drawers, and headed for the train station. She needed to get to an airport and move to her next location before her enemies returned.

\* \* \* \*

Jack sat in his room, his hands clenched. He could feel her panic. They'd found her, and once again, Sebastian would be too late. This time, he would be traveling with them. When they finally did locate her, it would be his face that she would see first, his arms that would hold her, hold their child. For it was his child. He had been with her as she was drugged, raped repeatedly and when she was finally conscious enough to escape. He could still remember the feel of the tranquilizer dart as it sank beneath her skin as she lost consciousness.

He shivered as his memories continued to plague him. At least she didn't remember the rapes, though he remembered the pain of them. He'd been in her mind often over the years, felt her pain, her happiness and her loneliness. Somehow, they would find the men who had attacked her and make them pay. Just not yet. First, they had to bring her safely home. Knowing that his mate was out there, suffering at another's hands and not able to do anything to help her had almost destroyed him. He'd do whatever he had to to help her heal once he finally got her home, help them both heal.

\* \* \* \*

"Can I talk to you, Keenan?" asked Blake. He'd wanted to give Keenan time to relax with Cerri especially after their extended healing session with Catalina, but he needed his help.

Keenan put down the sandwich he was eating

and turned to Blake. "Sure, what can I do for you?"

"This is more of a favor to Sam, but it's something we think you'll be able to solve for us."

"Now, doesn't that sound mysterious? You know I'll help you. What do you need?"

"Is Cerri busy? She may come in handy as well. We have some photos we want you to look at. We need to know if you recognize anyone."

"Sure, no problem. She's in that library of yours reading the latest in romance novels. She devours the things."

"I just bought a new stack for Alyssa, knowing being cooped up in the house would drive her nuts."

A few minutes later, Keenan and Cerri tracked Blake to the den where he was sitting behind his computer while talking on the phone. They took a seat while waiting for him to finish his call. Seconds later, Blake hung up and smiled at them. "That was Rafe. He'll be here in a few hours. He said there was no use sitting around on his ass in Florida when he could be where the action is."

"Is he bringing Tino with him?"

"Not this trip. He felt it would be better if Tino stayed behind and kept an eye on the inner workings of his pack. Seems there's been a rash of thefts in the compound and no one will admit to being the thief so he left Tino in charge of the investigation."

Keenan decided now might be the right time to get to business. "Where are these pictures you want us to look at?"

"Sam e-mailed them. Here, come and take a look."

Keenan and Cerri only took two minutes to spot the traitors. And only another three to spot the man who'd supposedly died nearly twenty years earlier. It seemed Sam's problems were still growing.

## Chapter Thirteen

Blake shifted in his seat, his hands gripping the edge of his desk. "What do you mean he died over twenty years ago? And who are you talking about?"

"The man in this picture. He's one of you. I met him once when I was a child. His name's Richard Winslow and he was the second in command of the Loup-garou then. He came to our camp quite often, though I never saw him come with anyone else. He met with my father several times."

"So he could have been at any of the compounds Sam's family visited. You think this is what Samantha wanted Sam to see?"

"How was he killed?" asked Cerri.

"We don't know. They never found a body. He came to our compound for a visit and disappeared. After an exhaustive search, it was thought that vampires had abducted him."

"We're not talking a vampire here, but a rogue Were-wolf who may or may not be working for one."

"That would be my guess."

"And the others you recognized?"

"I spotted two bears from my pack that disappeared at the same time as Winslow. Their names are Donal and Liam McTavish."

"Are you sure? Like you said, you were just a kid."

"A teenager actually."

"So how can you be sure?"

"It's hard to forget those two. At the time they disappeared, they were the prime suspects in a series of rape abductions among the nearby human population. If my father had found them guilty, they would have been killed in the ritual manner—bound to an altar, stabbed through the heart with a silver dagger, then incinerated until nothing but ash remained."

"And the wolf? How do you know he's the same man? People age in twenty-some-odd years."

"Because he's hardly changed at all. A little silver at the temples, some flesh around his jowls, longer hair. But it's the same man. I do know one thing. My father was always uneasy when Winslow showed up. He forbade us to have anything to do with him."

"What was he doing there? Any idea?"

"Not a clue. Father refused to speak of it. Just

told us never to be alone with him. Shortly after that, he disappeared and father never spoke of him again."

"We need to ask Sam if we can look through the journals of his predecessor. If this Richard guy was second in command then, we might find a clue."

"What good does all of this do, though? We're no closer to finding out why they want Samantha or even what they were doing in Spain that made her suspicious enough to take their pictures," said Cerri, who'd been listening quietly from the leather sofa.

"I'm not sure. Maybe she recognized the wolf and took pictures of everyone in the vicinity that night."

"Cat said something about Samantha being called out to a crime scene the night before she disappeared. It's possible she was taking pictures of the crowd. Some criminals like to hang out at the scene of the crime. Isn't that right, Blake?"

"They like to see their handiwork—see the police scramble and the media play up the story."

"Is it possible these three were following Samantha and she didn't realize she'd caught them on film until later?" asked Cerri.

"You know," said Catalina as she entered the room, "it wouldn't surprise me if she'd sensed she was being followed and used the crime scene photos as an excuse to capture them on film."

Sebastian turned to Catalina and pulled her into his arms. "Shouldn't you still be asleep, baby?"

"I woke up alone. Since I didn't fall asleep that way, I thought I'd track you down. What did I miss?"

"Well, we have ID's on three of our attackers at the hotel in Lucerne. Two bears and a wolf, who was suspected of turning traitor, but disappeared before he could be tried and brought to justice.'

"Instead of everyone standing in the doorway," said Alyssa, "why don't we move to the living room where everyone can be comfortable?"

"I thought you were resting, Alyssa," chastised Blake.

"I was resting, but when I went in search of Cerri for some woman talk, she was nowhere around. Naturally, I needed to investigate."

Cerri stepped forward and reached for Alyssa's hand. "The rest of you go ahead. Alyssa and I will be right behind you."

When the room was empty but for the two of them, Cerri led Alyssa to the couch. "What is it that you didn't want said in front of the men? And who's with the babies?"

"Jack. I could have asked him, but I felt uncomfortable talking to a man about this."

When Alyssa appeared to be fighting with herself as to whether or not she should ask her question, Cerri made the decision for her. "Spit it out."

"I just wanted to know when it would be okay for Blake and I to...well...you know?"

"Make love again?"

Alyssa nodded, affirming Cerri's assumption. "As you know, we Weres heal incredibly fast. You could conceivably have sex tonight if you wanted. I would recommend waiting at least two weeks though. Give your body time to rest. It held three babes for nearly six months. You'll know when the time is right."

"Thanks, Cerri. I didn't want to talk to Jack about this and I know Blake will want to know eventually. He's so concerned about the length of the delivery, he'd probably make me wait the six weeks that human women wait after giving birth."

"You know the heat between mates would make that impossible."

"Blake would certainly try if he thought it best for me."

Cerri chuckled. "At least you know you're loved."

Alyssa smirked. "Spare me from overprotective mates. Let's join the group in the living room. There is no telling what kind of plan they're hatching in there without us."

Cerri nodded and the two women headed out of the den to join the others. As they suspected, Blake, Keenan and Sebastian were discussing the details of the trip to Venice while Catalina looked on impatiently. "Uh-oh," whispered Cerri. "It looks like someone's is ready to rip out some fur. Should we go in and rescue our guys?"

"I'd say so. If looks could kill, our mates would be dead right now."

Entering the room first, Alyssa queried, "Shouldn't you all be including Catalina in the planning of this? And Jack? I know I wouldn't want to be left out at this stage if it were my sister or mate."

The three men exchanged sheepish glances and cleared their throats. "You're right, honey," said Blake.

"We weren't thinking," added Sebastian, a look of apology on his face. "I'm sorry, baby. I should have asked for your input. You know your sister better than any of us."

Catalina nodded and glanced over at Cerri and Alyssa. *Thank you*, she mouthed.

Alyssa nodded her understanding and went to join her on the couch. "We women have to stick together against these guys or they'll run all over us," she said with a wink. Turning to the men, Alyssa asked, "So who's going to go get Jack? He has the same right to be here, as you all do."

"She's right," Catalina agreed.

Cerri, who'd stopped in the doorway,

volunteered. "I'll stay with the little ones while you all are discussing plans."

\* \* \* \*

Moments after she left the room to trade places with Jack, the doorbell rang. "That's either Alyssa's assistant or Rafe. Either way, the next round of tonight's entertainment is about to begin," said Blake, his voice thick with laughter.

"It's not funny, Blake," Alyssa scolded. "Melissa just wanted some freedom before she took on a domineering male."

"I'll let her in," said Keenan, who was already halfway to the front entrance. "I imagine it's Melissa. I wouldn't expect Rafe for another half hour or so, even with the way he drives."

Sure enough, Melissa stood on the other side of the door, carrying a basket full of baby things. "Here, let me take that," Keenan offered.

"Thanks. So how are mother and babies doing?" she asked as she stepped into the house.

"Why don't you find out for yourself? Alyssa is in the living room, but Cerri is with the babes. Who would you like to see first?"

"Ohhh, tough choice. I guess I'll see the boss lady first." She grinned

Keenan nodded, then waved his hand for her to follow him. "This way."

As soon as Melissa entered the living room, she practically ran to Alyssa's side. "Hey, boss lady. How are you feeling? You're looking good for giving birth just over a day ago."

"Why, thank you, Melissa. I feel good. So what's in that big basket Keenan is clutching?"

"Oh, just this and that. Things I've been picking up over the last few weeks that I knew you would need."

"How sweet of you. You didn't need to do that."

"I figure it's my last stab at independence. Something I could do without having to discuss it with someone else first. I have a feeling, I'll be seeing my mate soon."

Everyone in the room turned different shades of red. Thankfully, Melissa seemed unaware of the looks she was generating.

"So," she asked, "when can I see the little miracles?"

"Right now if you want. I'm missing my children something fierce so you arrived just in time."

\* \* \* \*

As the two women left the room, Jack entered, his face red and his hands fisted at his sides. "From now on, any plans involving Samantha go through

me. I won't be left out again."

"Understood," said Sebastian.

Jack nodded and leaned against the wall, his arms and feet crossed. "So why don't we start from the top."

"At this point we should probably wait for Rafe. He should be here any minute. That way we can get everyone's opinions at once. It will make it simpler to plan."

No sooner had the words left his mouth, than the doorbell rang again. "I'll get it since I'm closest," offered Jack.

\* \* \* \*

Rafe couldn't figure out what was wrong with him. He'd been edgy the entire flight, never mind the drive here from Newark. If only he could figure out what was setting his nerves on edge, he would be a much happier man. It was so uncharacteristic of him. Oh well, he had other things that were more important to be worrying about. He'd fret over his nerves later. As soon as the door opened, he knew what his problem was. "Where is she?" he growled.

"Who?"

"My mate. She's here. In this house somewhere. Where is she?" Rafe pushed the man in the doorway aside and rushed into the house, not caring how rudely he was acting. He'd known about her for years, but she'd disappeared some time ago and he'd never known what pack she belonged to. She'd been too young for him then, but she'd be in her twenties now. He *would* claim her. He wouldn't let her escape him again. He followed her scent to the back of the house, bypassing the living room where he knew everyone was waiting on him. To hell with them. He'd settle this first.

He saw her. Tall as an Amazon of legend with burnished copper hair and emerald green eyes, she astounded him. His breath caught in his throat when he saw her cuddling one of Alyssa's babies. She looked so natural with a babe in her arms. Soon enough she'd be carrying one of his. If she agreed to it. First, he had to claim her.

As though she sensed his thoughts, she looked up at him and stared directly into his eyes. "It's you," she said with a sigh, her voice trailing off into nothingness.

"You've known about me and didn't come to me?" Now he was pissed. "Why in the hell not?"

"Because I knew you'd find me and I wanted time to be my own person before becoming the woman you'll demand."

She shocked him with that statement. "And you think being mated with me will negate who you are as an individual?" he asked, quite curious at

her thinking, despite the fact that she'd purposely stayed away from him. He held his breath as he waited her answer.

"I'm sorry to break up this love fest," Blake said from the doorway, "but we have a problem. I need everyone in the living room now. Where are Cerri and Alyssa?"

Rafe shrugged. "They disappeared to give us privacy as soon as I entered the room."

"Fine, I'll hunt down my mate and Cerri. Just head down to the living room."

## Chapter Fourteen

"Yes, now. And bring the babies. No child is to be left alone until further notice." As if to put emphasis on his words, he grabbed Allie and nodded toward the other two babies. "Grab them and hurry. I'm expecting a call back from Sam any minute," said Blake as he raced out of the room.

"We will finish this discussion," said Rafe as he reached into the crib and picked up Astra.

"If you're under the impression that I would fight your claim, you're wrong. I just wanted time. Now, we had better hurry. Whatever is going on, Blake is seriously worried." Melissa gathered a sleeping Danaan into her arms and exited the room with Rafe right on her heels.

Rafe shook his head as he followed Melissa down the hall. Already she was giving him orders. He grinned. She was perfect.

The phone rang just as they made it into the living room. The room overflowed with people waiting to hear Blake's news. From the look of things, everyone could feel his tension.

Blake answered the phone on the first ring. As he'd expected, Sam had called back with an update. "Do you mind if I put you on speakerphone, Sam? All of us are gathered here together as you asked."

"Go ahead. Rafe and Keenan are there, too?"

"Yes. Rafe arrived about fifteen minutes ago. All Weres need to be aware of this new attack on our kind."

Blake pressed the speakerphone button. Everyone seemed to hold their breaths as they waited to hear what Sam had to say. "You have the floor, Sam."

"Approximately one hour ago, three compounds of our people were attacked. It was a simultaneous attack, meant not to destroy us, but to distract us."

"Distract you how?" asked Keenan.

"While the warriors battled the vampires and traitors, another group of enemies managed to get behind the lines and into the areas where the elderly, women and children were hidden."

"Were they killed?" Rafe asked.

"Yes and no. They killed the elderly and infirm right away. The women and children simply vanished."

Sebastian shifted closer to the phone, his hands

fisted at his sides. "How many are missing?"

"At last count, there are twenty-one women missing and thirteen children."

Cerri gasped. "So many," she whispered.

"Any indication as to where they were taken and for what reason?"

"None, Keenan. I suggest you and Rafe get in touch with all your people and warn them."

"We're on it, Sam," said Rafe, already reaching for his cell phone.

Alyssa, cuddling Danaan to her chest, spoke up. "How do we get our women and children back if we don't know where they've taken them?"

"I don't know the answer to that yet. Has there been any news in relation to Samantha's disappearance or those pictures I sent?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, there has."

"What have you found out, Blake?"

"Three men we've identified so far, all of whom supposedly disappeared over twenty years ago. Two of them were part of Keenan's pack that they suspected of rape, but disappeared before standing trial. The other one was the second in command of your predecessor. His second is alive and, well, and after your sister, who happens to be pregnant. It could tie in with these attacks, though that seems like a stretch to me."

"I don't believe in coincidences, Blake. Find out the connection, if there is one. In the meantime, Keenan, Rafe?"

"Yes, Sam."

"Keep your people on alert. I don't think any Were is safe from this new challenge. We must keep our people strong and we can only do that by sticking together through this. There will be a free flow of information between my people and yours. I hope you two will do the same."

"Of course," vowed Keenan. "We stand by the pledge we made to you a few months ago."

Rafe, just finished speaking with Tino, chimed in. "We cats have your back as we know you have ours."

"I will understand if you two need to be with your people right now. If you want to back out on the search for the people trailing my sister, I understand."

"Since I'm also of the belief that there are no real coincidences," mused Rafe, "I'll be going with Sebastian, if it's all the same to you."

"And Cerri and I will be staying here. It will make it easier to coordinate with all my people from here. I'm more accessible if there are problems."

"Sounds good. And Sebastian?"

"Yes, Sam."

"Good hunting."

A distinctive click echoed through the room as Sam disconnected. Blake shifted in his seat. "Well,

it seems our problems have just multiplied. Are we ready to sit down and come up with some plans?"

With a collective nod, they all gathered around Blake, sitting on whatever piece of furniture was available. Melissa slouched against the wall, but Rafe wasn't having any of that. What better time to get her used to his touch than now? Having decided his course of action, Rafe walked over to Melissa, took her by the hand and led her to his chair. Instead of seating her though, he took the seat and pulled her onto his lap.

She didn't struggle, but instead, grew stiff and unyielding.

When all he did was hold her waist with one hand, she relaxed into him a little. Good, he thought. A good first step. Rafe was well aware of the curious looks the others sent him, but he just didn't give a damn. He'd finally found his mate. They could all understand what he was feeling right now. Fear, anxiety, nervousness, happiness and definitely a good dose of lust. Soon love would follow. No, he wouldn't be letting her go anytime soon.

"From what we know, Samantha's last known whereabouts is Venice, Italy. We don't know if she's still there or if it was just a stopping point until she headed in her real direction."

Catalina finally spoke. "When are we leaving?

Besides Keenan's people, who's accompanying Bastian, Rafe, Jack and me?"

"It seems I'll be joining you as well," Melissa added.

Rafe had been contemplating on how to go about getting her agreement to stay with him. Apparently, she meant it when she said she wouldn't fight their mating. But how were they to keep the women safe during this hunt?

Keenan stretched out his legs in front of him, crossing his ankles as he looked around the room. "I have a suggestion."

"Go ahead, Keenan."

"I say we fly my warriors from Maine straight here. I can get them on the first flight out if you can delay your trip for a few hours."

Rafe nodded. "I also have warriors available. I brought three with me. I left them to their own devices for the afternoon. But I can rally more troops if we need them."

"Keenan, how many people can you spare without causing a weakness in your own defenses?" asked Jack.

"I can spare maybe three warriors from my own pack. But I may be able to get some volunteers from Nick's pack out of New Orleans."

Blake straightened in his seat then gave a short nod as if coming to a decision. "Okay, this is what I suggest we do... I want at least a group of twelve making this trip. That means we come up with at least seven more bodies between us. Make your calls and we'll meet back in here in half an hour to see what we've come up with."

"Sounds like a plan," added Sebastian, though there was heavy doubt in his voice.

Rafe had heard about the attack on Sebastian's mate. More than likely Sebastian would prefer a larger group accompany them, but then they'd be too conspicuous. Right now, with a party of twelve, they would pass as a modest-sized tour group. Any more than that and they'd stick out like Pinocchio's nose.

\* \* \* \*

Melissa didn't know what to do. It felt odd to sit on a man's lap. Even odder still that it was her mate's. She'd known this day would come for years, but now she didn't know what to think about it.

He epitomized feline grace and beauty. His straight black hair gleamed. His amber eyes shone with a light and enthusiasm she'd rarely seen before. She could feel the strength in his hands, the muscles in his legs and chest. Her heart had hiccupped when he'd pulled her down on his lap. Now she didn't know if she was supposed to get up so he could make his calls or simply make

herself comfortable. As their people's leader, he probably expected privacy while he made his calls. Decision made, she tried to stand only to have him tighten his hold on her.

I guess I'm staying put, she thought, and settled back against his chest. Everyone seemed to have decided to stay in the living room to make their calls, though they did break off into groups. Wolves were with wolves, bears with bears, and apparently cats with cats.

It was interesting to see three different species working together on a project. She hoped she'd continue to be a participant in further interactions with the other Weres. She'd learned so much working Alyssa with and Blake at the Underground Railroad. The cooperation between different packs astounded her. With the pack she'd grown up in, cooperation just didn't exist. Dictatorship did. Rafe jostled her to get to his phone, jarring her out of her thoughts. "You sure you don't want some privacy?"

"No. You never have to leave the room when I'm conducting business. We are partners. We need to share everything. It's who we are. I won't hide anything from you and I hope you won't hide anything from me."

\* \* \* \*

Within an hour, warriors from three different species were on their way to New Jersey. Twelve hours later, a group of twelve were boarding Keenan's plane on their way to Venice.

"Why aren't you flying the plane, Sebastian?" asked Jack.

"I thought it would be smarter to arrive in Italy well rested. According to Blake, Samantha's credit card bill showed a charge at the Palazzo Odoni. We'll go there first. There was also a charge yesterday made at Harry's Bar. Maybe someone will have seen her and can point us in the right direction."

"As of now, we're still a full twenty-four hours behind her. She could be anywhere by now."

"We won't know until we get there. Keep the faith. It appears your mate is a resourceful woman."

"Yes, but they've captured her once already. Who's to say what they will do with her if they catch her again?"

Sebastian knew exactly how Jack felt. When it was your mate's life on the line, you couldn't help but worry about the worst-case scenario.

Turning to the rest of the people sitting throughout the cabin, Sebastian raised his voice. "Okay, this is the plan. We'll enter the hotel in groups of two and three. Jack, Catalina and I will go to the front desk and ask if there were any

messages left for us. The rest of you will spread out, covering the lobby. We don't want any nasty surprises waiting for us when we get there."

"Let me get this straight. You three are going to go up to the room alone. Do you think that's wise?" asked Thomas, a Were-bear from Nick's clan.

"No. If we discover her room number, we will all go up. We'll take separate elevators, two minutes apart. That way we know when back up is due to arrive if there is any trouble. Anyone lying in wait will not expect so many of us, considering what is going on at home." Sebastian turned to Jack, "Do you have anything to add?" he asked.

"Just that, it's my mate we're trying to find. She needs protection at all costs if she's still in the area. And be careful, we need each of you in order to bring her home where she belongs."

Sebastian looked over at Catalina and thanked the heavens above she had survived the attack. He couldn't imagine what Jack was feeling, knowing that Samantha was in very real danger and he was helpless to do anything about it.

"What happens if she didn't leave a message? Or if they won't tell us a room number, what's the plan then?" Catalina asked.

"We go to Harry's Bar just as we planned. Someone will recognize her, especially at this stage of her pregnancy."

Cat nodded and sat back in her seat, her expression closed.

Sebastian could feel her worry for her sister. He wished he could do more to ease her mind, but until Samantha was home, he couldn't do that. He wouldn't lie to her and say everything would work out the way she wanted it to, even though he wished he could.

\* \* \* \*

They arrived at the Marco Polo Airport in Venice, near dawn the next day. Most everyone slept on the flight, with the exception of Jack who seemed too wound up, and Sebastian who took a turn flying the plane after all.

Catalina slept fitfully, but at least she slept. Now if only she could get her mate to relax. Sebastian was pacing the cabin, going over exit plans and strategy with the group of warriors that had accompanied them.

Poor Jack. He looked like he'd been dragged behind a runaway horse. He definitely needed to get some rest, but Cat didn't foresee it happening. Not until Samantha was safely in his arms.

She had to say something to break the tension permeating the cabin. "I made fresh coffee in the galley if anyone is interested. Although I imagine the Italians know how to make a decent cup of Joe if you want to wait." Everyone chuckled as she'd hoped they would.

"Thanks, baby. I could use a strong cup of coffee right about now." Sebastian went to the galley and came back with a pot and a handful of mugs he'd placed on a tray. "Anyone care to join me?"

Several hands went up so Cat went to help her mate pass out the java. Everyone needed to be wide-awake for what was coming. Jack was first in line for some of the hot coffee, obviously aware that his sleepless night would be a detriment if he were too slow to react to danger.

After going over the plan one more time, the group of would-be tourists boarded a train and headed to San Marco. They agreed to approach the hotel on foot rather than take a water taxi so they could blend with the crowds.

They arrived at the Palazzo Odoni while another tourist group was checking in, which gave Sebastian, Catalina, Jack and the others time to wander the lobby without appearing suspicious.

Once the group had registered and the bellman had taken care of their luggage, the three of them walked up to the front desk. Earlier, they decided that Catalina would be the one to question the clerk so neither man was surprised when she stepped forward and planted herself in front of the clerk working the registration desk.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked in heavily accented English.

Catalina smiled at the woman. She just couldn't help it. "How did you know I was an American?"

The clerk shook her head and grinned, pointing. "The cameras around your neck. You're obviously tourists. I simply assumed you spoke English."

"Ahh, well, good call. I was wondering if my sister left a message for me. I'm on my honeymoon and she was staying at this hotel."

"Let me check. Your name?"

"Catalina Gasalla-Malone."

The clerk's head snapped up and her eyes drifted toward the bank of elevators. Oh shit, thought Catalina. She reached for her mate through their mental bond and felt immense relief when she felt his strength and calm pour into her. Something is wrong. This is a trap. I feel it.

## Chapter Fifteen

two days ago. In fact, your sister has kept the room booked, in case you needed it. Room number twenty-two. Here's the extra room key."

Keeping a pleasant smile on her face, Cat reached out mentally to her mate. She's being just a little too helpful. I don't like this either. She didn't even ask for my identification. If that wouldn't raise any alarms, I don't know what would.

In a prearranged signal, Sebastian shoved both his hand in his pockets. Jack stiffened beside them, obviously well aware of the emotions this woman was putting off, greed being the prevalent one. There must be something in this for her.

Catalina reached across the desk and grabbed the room key. I suggest the three of us take the stairs. The others will follow our lead. I don't want to end up trapped in an elevator if I can help it.

You're right, baby. The elevator could be a deadly trap. Let's get up there and see what they have planned

for us.

It can't be anything good.

We won't be so easily defeated this time, Sebastian vowed. Remember, they no longer have the element of surprise. He hated seeing Catalina worried. It tore at his gut to see the pain in her features.

Jack took lead position when they left the desk. When he started for the elevators, Sebastian stopped him with the wave of his hand and pointed toward the ornate stairs. "Catalina feels like a little exercise." Jack nodded and changed directions, charging up the staircase ahead of them.

Cat nodded toward Jack, then whispered, "It looks like he's anticipating what's to come."

Aware they could even now be watched, Sebastian raised his voice to make sure he was overheard. "Well, I've got to say this for your sister. She has excellent taste. This is a beautiful hotel. The owners did a wonderful job restoring it."

"Tell me about it. Did you see that chandelier in the entryway?"

As they approached the landing of the stairs where Jack stood waiting, the small talk stopped. It was time to get down to business. Jack straightened from against the wall. "We have a serious problem," he murmured. "Look down the hall."

Sebastian immediately obeyed. "Shit."

"That's my thoughts exactly."

"What. What's going on?" Catalina asked, her view blocked by Sebastian's broad back. He was in protector mode and until he deemed it safe or the risks were minimal, she couldn't participate in any of the action.

Sebastian took Catalina's hand and eased back around the corner. "There are two guards stationed in the hallway."

"If there are two outside, how many are actually in the room or rooms surrounding it, waiting to trap us?" Jack asked.

Sebastian frowned. "Good question. Can either of you sense how many?"

"No, I can't."

"Me either," Jack replied. "Why do you think I'm still standing here?"

Thomas, along with his partner, came up behind them. "What's the hold up?"

Sebastian turned to meet Thomas's gaze. "Obvious trap. Almost a little too obvious, now that I think about it."

"Why station guards in the hallway? That desk clerk would have called up to warn them we were coming, anyway," added Jack.

"They want to separate us. They expect you to see the guards and make me leave the area so you can sweep the place first." Sebastian looked at Cat. The idea had some serious merit. If they were after the women and children, what better way to get at them than to have the mate sidetracked trying to protect them? "Good thinking, Cat. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"Are we through talking here?" asked William, the Were-cat teamed up with Thomas. "Because I'm itching for a fight." He practically danced from foot to foot, filled with nervous energy.

"It looks like you're going to get one. Well, let's not keep them waiting."

With Catalina planted firmly between them, the group of five headed down the hallway, straight toward the two men leaning nonchalantly against the wall, pretending to read an Italian newspaper.

\* \* \* \*

"I believe you're waiting for us," Jack announced.

The two men slowly lowered their papers to reveal the guns they had tucked in the front of their pants. "Don't cause any trouble and you'll walk away alive," the burlier of the two men said.

Jack scoffed. "Who do you think you're kidding? You have no reason to let us go now that we've seen you."

"Well, aren't you the smart one. Isn't he the smart one, Mitch?" he asked his partner, sarcasm

dripping from his voice. He turned back to them, his pose no longer lazy, but threatening. He pulled the gun from his waistband and waved it toward the door of room twenty-two, Samantha's room. "In the room. Now," he demanded.

Jack's posture grew stiff, but he did as he was told. He couldn't chance causing a scene out in a public area. Neither could the bear with the gun. Sebastian's plan to have backup arrive every two minutes would prove to be a smart choice. They only had to survive the next minute or so.

As one, the group of five moved toward the room. "Open the door, and step inside." When they didn't seem to be moving fast enough, Mitch moved forward to shove them through the door.

Jack gripped the doorknob and pushed the door open, now aware of the three Weres waiting inside. There must have been a spell on the closed door that blanketed the room, allowing no one to sense what was on the other side. Opening the door must have broken the spell concealing the room's occupants. He could now feel their excitement, their need to inflict pain. He didn't like exposing Samantha's sister to such danger, but it was part of the plan. The bastards had to think that there was only the five of them, that though evenly matched in numbers, they were outgunned.

\* \* \* \*

Jack entered the room first, followed by Sebastian, then Catalina, Thomas and finally William. Only once everyone stood in the room, did Mitch and his partner follow suit.

Now what? Catalina asked her mate.

Now we wait. Less than a minute 'til we have reinforcements.

Out of the connecting bedroom, came three Weres, each of which held a gun equipped with a silencer. Were they going to try to kill them or was a kidnapping the plan? Either way, they'd better play along and try to get some answers.

"What are you planning on doing with us?" he asked the room at large, hoping to keep them talking long enough for the others to arrive.

"Us? It's only one of you we want. The woman—hand her over and we'll let you go. After we've tied you up and made our escape, of course. We can't have you catching up with us, now can we?"

Sebastian laughed. "You think I'm just going to hand over my mate to you without a fight? You're sadly mistaken." Sebastian could feel Cat's fear through their bond. These men would pay for putting her though this. He'd see to it.

"We have the guns," said the Were closest to Jack.

"You think that makes a difference?" Sebastian mocked. "Do you actually think only the five of us are in the area?" Just in case they managed to get off a shot, Bastian moved slightly to the right to stand in front of Catalina. He could see the others spreading out inch-by-inch, slowly moving toward their targets.

"It doesn't matter how many of you there are. We have you now. All we have to do is shoot you four and leave with her. We have most of the staff here on our payroll. No one will keep us from leaving with her."

The man closest to Jack smirked and lowered his weapon slightly. As though choreographed, Catalina stepped back against the door, her hand on the handle, while Sebastian's team attacked the rogue Weres.

Jack, though a doctor by trade, made quick work of his target. In seconds, he disarmed the gunman with a few well-placed kicks, knocking him to the ground. A little pressure to the neck and his enemy was unconscious, leaving him to stand guard over Catalina.

Sebastian could now concentrate on the man in front of him—the man who'd first ordered them into the room. Obviously, he wasn't the brain of the operation, but the brawn. With fierce concentration, he partially changed. He leapt forward as his fingers turned into claws, ripping

at the bear's face. He reacted as Sebastian thought he would, taking aim with his gun. But before he could get off a shot, Sebastian ripped the gun from his hands and tossed it into the far corner of the room.

"Now, Catalina," Sebastian shouted as he dived for a third man.

With Jack guarding her back, Catalina turned and quickly opened the door, expecting their reinforcements to be on the other side.

No one was in the hall. She slammed the door shut and bolted it closed. *Sebastian, they aren't there! Where is the rest of the team?* 

A puff of sound wafted through the room, then another and another. Glass shattered nearby, indicating the shots were going wild. Sebastian prayed none of the bullets came close to Catalina.

Stay safe. We'll worry about them later.

Just then, they all heard the ominous click of a door opening on the other side of the suite. Were there more of the enemy waiting in the other room? If so, they were in serious trouble. What in the hell had happened to the rest of their team? Where were Rafe and Melissa and the rest of the bears and cats? It just didn't make sense that everyone had been caught.

From the other room, they heard a cat's growl and hiss, a thump and finally the creak of the bedroom door. Sebastian recognized Rafe's scent immediately. Ahh, so they somehow had managed to secure a room key to the other door of the connecting suite. "Looks like you all might want to give up now," said Sebastian. "You seem to be surrounded."

Chaos broke out as the rogue Weres realized they were indeed trapped. Rafe leapt across the room and tackled the man confronting Sebastian, dragging him to the ground, freeing Sebastian to take his place next to Catalina. In seconds, the rest of the team flooded the room, blocking off all avenues of escape.

After securing the traitors, Sebastian paced the confines of the room. He needed to get answers and he needed them now. All five of the traitors were bound together in such a way that when one tried to loosen his bonds, the others would tighten.

They appeared sufficiently cowed, but that could change at any minute. For the moment, they knew their lives were in Sebastian's hands.

Once they realized they would die, they would become uncooperative and dangerous to have around. He had to convince them to leave the hotel willingly. He couldn't risk leaving their bodies for autopsy, never mind the fact that if not destroyed properly they could rise again as vampire.

First things first. He needed to get them out of

the hotel unseen. He turned to Jack, who still stood protectively over Catalina. "You didn't happen to slip some truth serum in your back pocket before we left the plane, now did you?"

"No, but I might be able to do you one better. I have a unique talent. I can seize control of an uncooperative mind. It helps in my medical practice, but I can force them to give you the answers you need and get them out of the hotel."

"Does Sam know you can do this?" Sebastian asked, curious.

"It's never come up in conversation."

"Well, do your thing. I suggest we get them out of here first, then question them. I have a feeling reinforcements will be on their way shortly."

Sebastian watched as Jack closed his eyes and seemed to focus on something within. In seconds, the group of traitors stopped struggling with their bonds, their faces became relaxed, almost jovial.

Jack opened his eyes and turned his attention back to Sebastian. "You can release them now. They can't fight you."

Sebastian glanced from the prisoners to Jack, uncertain. *I feel no anger coming from them.* 

*I believe Jack has control over them,* Catalina whispered using their mental link.

Decision made, Sebastian nodded to the rest of the team. "Go ahead and release them." He turned to Thomas and William. "Check the hall. I want as few people to see us leave with them as possible. Let me know when it's clear."

"Wait. We still need to see if my sister left any clues for me to find."

"You're right, Cat. Search the rooms as quickly as possible. We need to get out of here."

Catalina nodded and got to work. It took longer to find what her sister left behind than the last time. Only sheer luck had her searching the inner lining of the room's drapes. Less than five minutes after she noticed the heaviness of the long curtains when she opened them, she came back carrying a manila envelope. "I'm ready. Let's get out of here."

Once he'd received the all clear, the entire team cleared out of the rooms. They weren't going to take a chance at an ambush at this stage of the game. Shortly afterward, they found themselves on the train bound for the airport.

\* \* \* \*

The watcher followed at a distance, giddy with success. He'd found them, a whole pack of the creatures. Everything was in place.

He followed them as far as the airport, then left to report his findings. He snickered in excitement. All was going as planned. The plot formulated thousands of miles away, on the back of a pizza

### The Protector's Keeper

box, was about to come to fruition. Then they would all pay.

## Chapter Sixteen

re you sure you saw them all together?" the man asked. Things were just now falling into place. They couldn't afford any more mistakes. They'd already made one when they'd turned their backs and let that bitch escape. Another mistake could cost them everything they'd worked so hard for over the last few years, and that was unacceptable.

"Yes. They boarded the train and went straight to the airport exactly as you suspected they would. I imagine, even now, they are heading back to the Donovan place. Soon we will not only have the Donovan woman and her children, but the bitch's sister as well. All without lifting a hand ourselves."

"Don't be too confident. Things can still go wrong," the man admonished.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Tell our people to implement part two of the plan."

"Yes, sir." The watcher observed his master walk out of the room, then sneered. He had other plans in mind for the women. Sure, he'd get the ball rolling on the master's grand scheme, but it wouldn't come to anything if he had anything to say about it. For the master's end was almost upon him, and then He would be in charge. Soon, the master would realize he wasn't the master of anything or anyone.

\* \* \* \*

The team moved as one on the Donovan home. Reports showed that the private plane had landed at the Newark airport with the prisoners four hours ago. It was near midnight and all was dark inside the house. Everyone was sleeping and they didn't expect a thing. This would be a cakewalk.

Armed with a sufficient amount of firepower, they could take out an entire army if needed. Their guns were loaded with enough silver bullets to destroy anything they came across twice over.

With the signal given, the group moved forward. Wearing dark camouflage and their faces painted black, they blended into the night. Their movements were silent, their strategy simple. Get in, steal the women and children and kill everything else that moved. It was a duty the team not only thought necessary, but also enjoyed.

The covert squad spread out, covering all the entrances. They couldn't chance anyone making it out alive. Anyone not taken prisoner must die. They were fortunate in that the Donovans had moved out of the city. Their closest neighbor lived nearly a quarter mile away. With the raging ocean in the background, the sound of gunfire should blend into the night. Just in case, all the handguns and sniper rifles were fitted with silencers. There would be no mistakes.

As one, the team rushed the house, breaking in windows and doors. They met only silence. The dark house gave up no inhabitants and no secrets—just an eerie silence that echoed through the night. The silence laughed at them, mocked them. There would be no victory tonight.

\* \* \* \*

Sam leaned back in his chair and looked over the eclectic group of Weres surrounding him. They'd managed to evade a tragedy today thanks to Samantha's information and they still had the traitors to interrogate. He looked down at the manila envelope he held in his hands. It wasn't much, but it was enough, a recording of Samantha relaying an overheard conversation and a personal message to him and her sister. It wasn't much, just the necessary information to warn them that no

one was safe, especially the Donovans. He could hear his sister's voice for the first time in twentyone years. That alone was precious to him. No one understood his burning need to find his sister. Not really. She would always be a part of him, his twin.

They'd retreated to Sebastian's new home as it was as yet unknown to the group or groups operating against them. There was plenty of space for everyone to roam around in without bumping into one another.

The plane landed at Newark on schedule, they unloaded the prisoners and immediately boarded Sebastian's jet. They hired a Hummer limo to drive to the Donovan home, up the long driveway, and park around back. After a short while, the limo left, giving the illusion that it had unloaded several passengers who didn't want to be seen.

The plan worked like a charm as Sebastian's house was empty except for the lone wolf who stood guard over it. By the time Sebastian, his team and their prisoners arrived, Sam and Blake had opened the house and stocked it for the long haul. Keenan cast a druid spell of protection over the house and grounds in preparation for an attack, and every inhabitant of the house was on guard. With all the preparations completed, the waiting game was now underway.

Standing behind the chair where Melissa sat,

Rafe, too, looked over the gathered crowd. All but two of their group were present. The others stood guard outside the room where they kept the prisoners. Calling it a room was being generous—they were locked in the empty pantry with no hope of escape. Although, in their drugged stupor, they wouldn't attempt escape for some time.

When they'd attacked Melissa at the hotel in Venice, Rafe had lost it, shifting into his cat form amidst an entire group of the enemy and their own people. Even now, he was still dangerous. He wasn't about to leave his mate's side. It would be quite some time before he would feel comfortable enough to leave her unprotected. It had taken her restraining touch to keep him from mauling the man who dared to slap her.

The question now—what to do with the little information they'd gathered. Samantha's message, though helpful in the short term, didn't tell them who was responsible for the attacks against their people. Or what their ultimate goal was. They were thankful for it, just the same. Her information had most certainly saved all their lives.

Rafe turned his attention to Sam. "Why don't you replay the message, Sam? Maybe there's something in there that we all missed before." Though he doubted it, it was an avenue that

needed exploring until exhausted.

Sam nodded. "Sure thing."

Rafe watched as Sam bent down and pressed the play button on the recorder. The room grew silent as Samantha's sultry voice echoed through the room.

"I don't have much time. They spotted me almost immediately upon my arrival. It's almost as if they know what I'm going to do before I do it. It sometimes makes me wonder if they don't have their own seer in their ranks. I managed to get close enough to hear a portion of a conversation today. I hope it's relevant and that the information gets to you in time. There is an attack planned on the Donovans. Their mission, from what overheard, is to kidnap the woman and their children and kill her mate. These men made it sound as though the Donovans were one family among many being targeted, though I could be off base about that since they didn't mention anyone else. Do what you can with this information. I must go. Even now, I can feel them closing in on me."

There was a slight pause before the tape continued. "Sam, if you're listening to this, I'm sorry for all the years we've missed. I've often wished I could be there with you. I hope that one day we can be together, but there are things that you must still do without my interference. I pray

things go as I've seen them. You have my love now and always. Have faith in your decisions. You're a good man and a better leader."

Samantha's voice seemed to grow lighter when she addressed her sister. "Catalina, sister of my heart, only you could have found this tape. Who else in the world would look inside the lining of curtains for this clue? I hope that you have found all that you have been looking for in your mate. May he always keep you safe and well loved, though I have no doubts. The only other piece of information I can offer is this. Whoever is after me is a powerful man. He's had people searching for me within hours of my arrival. I don't know how he's tracing me so quickly. I'm sure you've discovered by now I'm pregnant. I wish I could explain the how and why of it. All I know is that I was tranq'd while on a run."

Everyone in the room grew still as they listened to Samantha's tale. "I awoke in a rundown shack, tied hand and foot to a rusted iron bed. I escaped and immediately went on an assignment to get away. I didn't want you to know what had happened to me Lina. Call it pride or just sisterly love, I'm not sure which. I realized almost immediately after my arrival in Africa that I was pregnant. I kept this information to myself until I was too far along to deny it. Even though this pregnancy was born of rape, I still hold true to my

beliefs. I could not in good conscience abort it. Condemnation for that act should fall to the father, not to the child. Once I knew you were heading home, I realized it was time to come clean, but by then I had picked up a tail. I don't know if they are after me, the baby, or both of us. I decided to do what I do best. Take pictures. I hope you've identified the men in the pictures by now, Sam. It's important. They will give you the answers you seek. Answers for both the past and the present—trust in the answers you find."

Rafe snarled at hearing the panic thickening Samantha's voice. He could only imagine what Jack was feeling. "They are closing in. I must go. Good luck to all who are listening. You've a tough road ahead."

Only static and silence filled the room. Samantha had such strength and courage. She epitomized the very essence of all that their people stood for. Rafe would do his best to bring this woman home to Sam, to her sister and to her mate.

Speaking of mates. Rafe looked down at his. She was still skittish around him, especially after seeing his violent nature. He couldn't blame her. What they needed was more personal time together. He leaned down and whispered to her, "Once we're through with the prisoners, will you spend some time with me?"

Melissa refused to meet his eyes, but she did

nod yes.

The relief he felt was enormous. He didn't want to chance starting this relationship on the wrong foot, but he couldn't devote his full attention to her until the situation they were in was resolved either. He would cherish whatever time they had together until then.

Sebastian was the first to break the pervasive silence. "Sam, do you have any idea what your sister meant about answers from your past?"

Sam nodded, his eyes haunted. "The only question about the past which I've searched for answers is the mystery surrounding our parents' death."

"We can assume from her cryptic statements, that their murders are somehow related to our current situation," added Keenan.

"That's the only assumption I can make," Sam answered.

"I hate to rain on everyone's parade," interrupted Thomas, "but how do we know your sister is correct? No offense, sir, but it's possible she's seeing connections where there are none. Who could blame her after what she's been through?"

Sam nodded his agreement. "You have a valid point. But it's the only lead we have. While you continue your search for my sister, I'll concentrate on getting the answers we need. Answers from the past and the present as she has instructed."

Thomas nodded grudgingly and left the room.

Something about the man just sent Rafe's every nerve zinging. He would have to talk to Sam about Thomas and soon. Something about the man rubbed his fur the wrong way. But first, there were the prisoners to see to. "May I suggest, Sam, that we interrogate the prisoners now? If that's all right with you, Jack?"

Jack looked up, his eyes filled with fire. "I think it's a very good idea."

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian desperately wanted to interrogate the prisoners. Danger surrounded Catalina and her sister. They deserved answers as to why. Curled up on his lap, seemingly content to just be held, she stayed silent. He was worried about her. Ever since listening to the tape on the plane, she seemed lost in her own little world. Nothing seemed to penetrate the shell she'd surrounded her heart in.

For that, he would see that justice was done. The traitors would be punished. He had to touch her, to try to connect with her somehow. He stroked her hair, her arms, wherever he could reach. Come on, baby. Talk with me. Tell me what you're feeling.

I'm sorry, Sebastian. I feel bad for her. So much pain and suffering she endured, alone. I should have been there for her. I should have known she was in trouble. She raised her head to look at him, her eyes filled with unshed tears. Why didn't I know, Bastian? Why?

Because she didn't want you to, Cat. His hand stroked her back lovingly. There is nothing you can do about the past now. However, we can do something about the present and the future. Keep the faith. We will bring her home and we will make those responsible pay. I promise you that.

Catalina nodded and curled herself even tighter against his chest. At least she wasn't pulling away from him. At least he had that to be thankful for. Things could be worse.

Just as they all began to rise, William stumbled into the room. Blood poured down the side of his face and dripped onto the floor. He sported a gash at least three inches long across his left cheek.

"What happened?" Sam demanded.

"Thomas. He attacked. The prisoners—they're gone. He's freed them."

"Shit!" Sebastian shouted. He should have known something like this was possible. They knew they had traitors living amongst them. They just didn't know how close the traitor had actually integrated himself. The question on Sebastian's mind—when did he turn? Before or after he was picked for this mission? The answer to that

question might very well be vital.

As one, the group ran out of the room, some to check on the children, others to seek privacy to shift. They had enemies to hunt and this time there wouldn't be a delay in the questioning. Punishment would follow immediately. They couldn't allow anyone to escape. As it was, they would have to relocate yet again. Who knows whom Thomas had already gotten word to? They couldn't afford to chance it.

Sebastian turned to Catalina, anxiety written in his eyes. "Stay by my side." He grasped her hand and together they rushed to the nearest empty room to shift. Perhaps they should have shifted as soon as they'd heard the news, but he didn't think he could take watching Catalina strip in front of other people.

Sam, Keenan, Jack and Rafe were just exiting the kitchen as Sebastian and Catalina passed. "Sebastian?" Sam called.

Sebastian stopped and turned. "Yes, Sam."

"Keenan and I will be staying here with our mates, standing guard over them and the children. Take Rafe, Jack and the rest of the team and hunt them down. Kill only when necessary. We still have answers to get. The more of them we have to question, the more information we're likely to get."

"You got it," he promised, then continued

down the hallway, Catalina in tow. He pulled her to a stop in front of the library. "We'll change in here." She nodded and opened the door, entering the room with Sebastian on her heels. He wished he could have shown her this room once they had moved in permanently. It was his favorite room in the house, save the bedroom. The walls were wall-to-wall bookshelves standing nearly twelve feet tall. The shelves overflowed with books, from first editions to the latest paperbacks on the market. As soon as the lock clicked behind him, Sebastian took Catalina's hands in his. "Be careful out there, baby. I can't lose you."

She smiled softly, putting her hand to his cheek. "You won't lose me, honey. Besides, we'll have Lobo on our side as well. He won't let anything happen to either of us."

Sebastian nodded and started to strip. Catalina wasted no time in following suit. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on initiating the change.

Almost immediately, pain shot through his arms, his legs. He heard bones crunch, felt them shift beneath his skin. His arms and legs itched as fur sprouted. His back spasmed, pain lashed at him from the inside, forcing him to drop down to all fours.

Soon his face began to shift, to elongate. His nose, mouth became a muzzle, his teeth became instruments to rend and tear, to kill. His hands

and feet became paws, armed with deadly claws. After a few more moments, a large wolf stood in Sebastian's place. Next to him sat Catalina, his match in every way.

As one, they turned toward the door. Sebastian reached up and slapped at the handle with his paws, unlatching it. They nosed their way through the opening and headed for the front of the house where all the other Weres were gathering. A mixture of bears, cats and wolves sat at the threshold of the door, awaiting Sam's orders.

He was short and to the point. "Find them, interrogate them and kill them. Not one of them is to get out of here alive. Keenan and Rafe are in agreement with me on this. Happy hunting."

Keenan nodded his agreement, then opened the front door. "The area surrounding the house is protected by ancient magick so don't worry about us. Just do your duty and find the traitors. We'll have a burning ceremony once everyone is recaptured. Not a one of us will chance them rising again as Vampire."

Together the group of Weres exited the house, each intent on bringing the traitors to justice, not only for the atrocities done to Samantha, but also for all the Weres currently being hunted by their unknown enemy. It didn't take long to find the trail the traitors had taken or where they'd decided to split up to try to escape on their own.

### Bonnie Rose Leigh

Soon, five teams of Weres and one lone wolf were on the hunt, each following the trail of a turncoat.

# Chapter Seventeen

Blake descended the stairs slowly, having raced to the nursery to check on the children. "I should be out there with them, Sam. They need all the help they can get."

"No. We need you here in case of attack. The children must be protected, their mothers as well. Alyssa only gave birth a week ago. She's in no condition to protect herself, never mind the babies."

Blake nodded, though reluctantly. It didn't sit well with him that he couldn't do more to help. Sam was right. The women and children were the most vulnerable to attack right now. He was a protector. He would protect. "Where do you want me?"

"You and Cerri are to stand guard at the nursery. You'll be our last line of defense. Keenan will cover the back of the house. I'll cover the front. William, though injured, insisted on patrolling but I can't trust his motives. He could be in league with Thomas."

Blake was about to voice his own opinion on that when Sam interjected.

"I won't risk having him running around. Before he shifted, Jack gave William an injection, which should keep him unconscious for hours. He's handcuffed and locked in the pantry. Not very original, as that's where the others escaped from, but since Sebastian didn't pick a house with a dungeon, that was our only option."

Blake couldn't agree with Sam's decision more. "Where's Cerri at?"

"She went to our room to shift." Keenan closed his eyes, obviously communicating with her. "She's already at the nursery," he answered. "Not much will get past the pair of you."

Keenan didn't look as confident about his statement as he sounded. It was hard to stand by as your mate went to battle. He knew that first hand. With a nod of his head, Blake turned on his heels and took the stairs two at a time until he reached the nursery.

While Cerri guarded the children in her bear form, he'd do battle as a human. Elizabeth, Sam's mate, sat next to a crib, gripping the hand of one of her sons, while Alyssa sat up in bed nursing Allie. It amazed Blake that he could already tell his two daughters apart at a glance, though he'd know them by their unique scents alone. He

looked up to find Alyssa smiling at him. "What do you find so funny?"

"You. The sappy look you get on your face whenever you look at your children. It just doesn't fit the tough guy image you try and project."

"You mean the same expression Sam gets when he looks upon his own boys?" Elizabeth added, with a small laugh.

From the hallway, they heard Cerri bellow. It sounded suspiciously like a laugh to Blake. "Sure, laugh it up you all. Laugh it up."

\* \* \* \*

Outside, a lone wolf howled into the night, evidence that the first traitor was as good as dead. Sebastian and Catalina paused, waiting for Lobo to pinpoint the traitor's general location for them. When the next howl rent the air, they took off running, leaping rotted tree stumps, jumping over fallen logs, and rushing through the overgrown underbrush.

The hunt was upon them. Catalina's blood surged, heat raced through her limbs. The rhythm of her paws pounding the ground matched the rhythm of her beating heart. She would find the one she searched for. She would make him pay. The wolf was in full control now and heaven help anyone who tried to stop her from getting the

answers she needed and dispensing swift punishment to the enemy.

She could feel her mate's same determination, his enthusiasm. It fed her drive to reach their quarry. She ran faster as she sensed the traitor up ahead. He thought he could hide, could escape. Soon he would discover just what stopping his flight would cost him. A short bark and a low growl pinpointed their target's hidden location.

They smelled him before they saw him. He thought to attack from above, but Lobo's warning reached them in time. As a team, the three wolves circled the tree, making sure to keep out of the range of the big cat's reach.

A low rumbling hiss was the only warning they received before Thomas launched himself from the branch he'd been crouched on, straight at the lone female in the group. He'd assumed she would be the weak link in the circle they formed around him. He was sadly mistaken.

Catalina felt great pleasure in the fact the he chose to attack her. She bunched her muscles and leapt to meet the cat. With claws extended, she raked Thomas's side, leaving deep bloody furrows in his fur, rending his flesh with apparent ease.

When Thomas tried to counter-attack, Sebastian launched himself with unearthly menace at the cat's back. A snarl rumbled in his throat as he dived for the cat's jugular, intent on forcing

Thomas's surrender.

Lobo took up guard position as the battle raged around him. Catalina crouched behind her mate ready to defend him if the need arose. The bloodlust slowly fading from her mind, allowing her to reason again.

Her mate had Thomas trapped below him. She could smell the blood flowing from the cat's wounds, could hear his heart galloping in his chest, and feel his fear permeating the air around them. At his current rate of blood loss, he'd be unconscious shortly. He'd be easier to handle that way and less of a danger to them all.

The problem now would be how to transport the unconscious Were. No one thought to leave the house with a bag of clothing strapped around their necks. Hopefully, Bastian had some of his own clothes stashed somewhere. Otherwise, they'd be dragging the naked man back to the house, which after careful consideration, she felt the traitor deserved. Sebastian, do you have a stash of clothes nearby?

My closest stash is about two hundred yards in the direction we came from. I tucked it within the limbs of a white birch.

She could feel his indecision. She didn't blame him. With six traitors still unaccounted for it made sense to stick together. I'll take Lobo with me. We need to get Thomas back to the house. Is there anything

in your bag we can use to restrain him?

There may be a belt in the bag. I usually only pack a set of clothes and a first aid kit.

I'll be right back.

Be careful.

Catalina took one last look at the unconscious cat, then headed in the direction from which they came. It didn't take her long to find the appropriate tree. Sebastian's scent saturated the air around it. Yet, the scent of another almost overpowered it. It took only a split-second for her to process the information, but long enough to prepare for the battle to come. Sebastian was going to be pissed. At least she had Lobo to fight alongside her.

A huge black bear lumbered out of the trees at a dead run, heading straight toward the pair of wolves. He knew his only chance of escape would come with their defeat. Catalina wasn't about to give him that opportunity.

Sebastian must have sensed her fear through their mental bond because he came barreling through the trees at the exact moment the bear reached them. His entrance distracted the bear long enough for Cat and Lobo to simultaneously launch themselves at their attacker.

Lobo went for the bear's legs, intent on knocking its feet out from under him. Catalina went straight for the bear's chest. With claws extended, she ripped through fur and skin to the muscles beneath. Their combined attack knocked the bear to his back.

Sebastian's jaws locked around the bear's throat before he could swipe at the attacking wolves with his deadly claws. With three wolves pinning him to the ground, the bear roared his defeat. His chest bellowed as he attempted to draw in enough air to breathe, but his struggle was for naught. Sebastian clamped down on the bear's windpipe while Catalina's pressed her weight into its chest.

The bear struggled to remain conscious, swiping at empty air with ever-weakening movements. Before long, he lost the battle to remain conscious. Unable to hold his animal form in his unconscious state, the bear shape-shifted back to his human appearance. Lying beneath the three wolves, was the man who'd first pulled the gun on them at the hotel in Venice. With blood pouring out of the wounds on his neck, chest and legs, he didn't look as intimidating as he had dressed and conscious.

Now what?

Well, we now have two prisoners and no way to get them back to the house at the same time.

I may be a woman, but I am still a Were. I can carry a man twice my size. I'll grab Thomas. You take this fellow.

Thomas is sprawled just on the other side of that tree there. I didn't like the idea of our separating for any length of time so I started dragging him as soon as you left my side. You scared the hell out of me, baby.

For a second there, I scared the hell out of myself. Catalina loped to where Sebastian had left Thomas. Sure enough, he lay just where Bastian had left him, but he didn't look good. His breathing was erratic, his pulse weak. I don't think he's going to make it much longer, Bastian.

Sebastian turned to Lobo, releasing the bear's throat. *Guard*. Then he raced to where Catalina stood over the prone Were-cat.

Shit! We need to know when he received his orders to betray us. If our enemy has a seer, like Samantha, we're in more trouble than we thought.

Then I suggest you try to wake him up. He won't make it to the house.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian knew she was right. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on what if felt like to be human, with arms and legs, hands instead of paws, skin instead of fur. The air stilled around him. A wrenching pain traveled through his body, proof he was returning to his human form.

Soon, Sebastian, the man, stood next to Catalina. He reached down and ran his hand through her fur, then squatted next to Thomas. Cat was right. Thomas would die long before they reached the house. If they wanted answers from

him, this would be their only opportunity.

"As much as I hate you being with the Werebear without me, Lobo shouldn't guard him alone. He could come to at any second."

You're right. Besides, I think you can handle this one on your own.

Smartass. Sebastian looked down at Thomas after she'd left. Why would he betray his people this way? What did he have to gain? He closed his eyes, pain at the betrayal ran deep. A lone tear escaped to trail down his cheek.

Do you need me?

No, baby. It just saddens me that so many condemn themselves this way. I feel like every time I have to dispense justice, I lose a piece of my soul.

Your soul is intact, Sebastian. It shines through every part of you. Do what you have to and then come back to me.

Sebastian gave her a mental nod and then turned his attention back to the Were-cat. He'd accumulated quite a few scratches when Sebastian had dragged him through the trees. But they were the least of Thomas's worries now. The claw marks that ran across his torso were deep and blood still seeped from the wounds. Catalina's attack, though short-lived, had effectively ended Thomas's life.

The Were-cat should have known better than to attack her. She, of all of their people, had more to protect right now. Her sister, her mate, her wolf companion. Catalina was the most dangerous Were in the group.

Sebastian gave Thomas a nudge. When that didn't seem to have any effect, he shook him harder. Thomas moaned as he slowly regained consciousness. Sebastian waited until he saw Thomas's eyelids flutter before speaking. "I know you're awake. Here me now. You're dying and I can't stop it. Either you can give me the answers I need and die a painless death or you can slowly bleed to death from your wounds. It's your choice."

"Go to hell," he mumbled.

"When did they get to you? When did you turn to the enemy?"

"You...kill...anyway."

"Yes. But you have a chance to save your soul. Don't lose it because of simple greed."

Thomas chuckled. Blood dribbled from his lips. He wouldn't last much longer. "Not greed...sister taken...William told me...any choice." He gasped a wheezing breath, then his chest stilled. He lived no more.

Sebastian leaned down and closed the Werecat's eyes. They would need to burn his body. They couldn't chance him rising again as vampire, even if he had released the traitors in hopes of gaining his sister's release. If what he'd said was indeed the truth.

They had to get back to the house before William could do more damage. William would talk. He'd see to it personally.

Sebastian stood, lifting Thomas's body over his shoulder and walked to where Catalina and Lobo stood guard over the still unconscious and very naked Were-bear. He really didn't like Catalina looking at another man. Even one knocked out and covered with blood.

However, he knew it was the way of life for their people. He'd just have to get past his jealousy, his need to keep her to himself. There would be times when she would be naked in front of their people as well. That would be a little harder to swallow, but somehow he'd manage to control himself and not become a slavering beast.

Yours is the only body I'm interested in. All I see in front of me is a man who traded his soul long ago. A pathetic excuse of a Were. He's nothing. You had better get dressed before we get back to the house. Because I know there will be hell to pay if even one of the women sees you naked.

Sebastian chuckled. He hadn't felt Catalina enter his mind. She was becoming quite adept at running around in there without his knowledge. "You got it. If I remember right, there are a couple of sets of clothes in this bag. I should have something for both of us to wear back."

Good, I don't want anyone looking at me other than you. Now, let's get this man restrained before he wakes

up. He's been groaning. He won't be out much longer.

Sebastian didn't waste any more time. He walked over to the tree where he'd stashed his bag, grabbed a hold of one of the lower limbs and swung into the branches.

A bag landed at Lobo's feet a few seconds later, then Bastian jumped free of the tree, planting himself next to Catalina. He ran his hand through her fur, scratched behind her ears, unable to help himself. She was beautiful in whatever form she took.

The Were-bear moaned, his eyelids began to flutter. They were out of time. Sebastian quickly rummaged through his bag, pulling clothes out and tossing them to the ground. As he thought, he had a pair of sweats, a pair of jeans and two t-shirts. At the bottom of the bag, he found a belt. Made of thick leather, with holes every inch or so, it would have to do in restraining their prisoner.

Sebastian quickly rolled the man to his stomach, before he could regain full consciousness and wrapped his hands in the belt, cinching it as tightly as he could. When he looked back at Catalina, she had already shifted and was busy pulling on his sweats and one of the t-shirts. The get-up swallowed her whole, but at least she was covered. Sebastian didn't waste any time in getting dressed. There weren't any shoes in the bag, but they could do without those. "You ready

to go?" he asked Catalina, who looked disgusted as she stared down at Thomas's body.

"Yeah. Just not looking forward to carrying a dead body around."

"I know, baby. We can leave him here and come back for him?"

"No, he needs to be brought back to the house. We can't chance him rising again before we can retrieve him. Besides, animals might get to him and I wouldn't want to poison them."

Sebastian laughed. He couldn't help it. His mate had a wicked sense of humor. Shaking his head, he bent down and lifted his prisoner to his shoulder. The man was heavier than he looked.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he watched Catalina sling Thomas over her shoulder. He would have to remember that simply because she was female, didn't mean she wasn't as capable as he was.

Twenty minutes later, they arrived at the house to find all the lights out. Automatic rifle fire shattered the stillness of the night.

"Oh shit! What now?"

# Chapter Eighteen

atalina dropped Thomas where she stood. "Take cover," Sebastian shouted. With one hand on his prisoner, he grabbed her wrist with the other and dragged her back toward the woods, Lobo right on their heels. Sebastian stopped when they were about five hundred yards from the house. "I have to go check this out. Stay with him and stay safe." He turned to Lobo. "Stay with her," he ordered and then ran back the way he came.

From behind, she heard the snap of twigs and the skittering of rocks. She recognized Rafe's scent immediately. He skidded to a halt in beside her, shifting as he came to a stop.

"Melissa is right behind us. We can't leave you out here unprotected. The three of us will head to the house together."

Catalina nodded. She didn't like the idea of her mate racing into the house alone anyway. At least now she had reinforcements. A shiny black panther emerged from behind the trees. Her mate must have given her the all clear. She nodded to the panther, then turned back to Rafe. "We were walking up to the house when we heard the gunshots. The house was dark. Someone must have cut the power. Sebastian dropped us off here and ran back to see if he could help."

Rafe bent down and hoisted the now-struggling Were-bear over his shoulder. "Stay close."

Catalina was thankful that the Were-bear was too weak to shift, otherwise, they'd have no choice but to dispose of him now before they could question him. She followed Rafe back to the house, always conscious of the surrounding area, of the scents and sounds the night relayed to her. Lobo stayed close to her side and Melissa paced beside her. *Sebastian?* 

I'm in the house.

I'm with Rafe. We're heading your way.

Be careful. I'm on my way to the nursery now.

We're right behind you. "Rafe, Sebastian is heading to the nursery."

"Did he say whether he sensed anyone in the house?"

Rafe wants to know if you sense anyone there with you.

The house feels empty to me. I don't sense anyone.

Catalina pulled Rafe to a stop. "He doesn't sense anyone in the house at all."

Rafe nodded. "They couldn't have gotten the drop on everyone. They must have felt the intruders and escaped while they could. Keenan's spell must have worked. They'll be close by. He must have them cloaked somehow." Catalina worried her bottom lip. She didn't like that Sebastian had gone in to search the house alone.

Sebastian must have felt her worry through their mental bond. She heard his voice before she felt him in her mind. I'm fine. William is lying in the nursery on the floor. Looks as if either Cerri or Keenan went up against him.

Get out of there, Sebastian.

I'm on my way back downstairs. I used the curtain ties to secure him. It's the best I can do for now.

Catalina turned her attention back to Rafe. The Were-bear must have passed out again, because he'd stopped struggling against Rafe's hold.

They were approaching the front porch when she felt bullets whiz past her head. With preternatural speed, she raced up the porch steps and dived into the entryway, followed closely by Rafe, Lobo and Melissa. Sebastian came running down the stairs just as she scurried to the door and slammed it closed.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian's heart was in his throat. When he'd

heard those shots fired, everything inside him stilled. He feared Catalina was their target, despite knowing the women weren't to be injured, but captured instead. He couldn't get down the stairs from the second story fast enough. When he saw her dive through the door, he actually felt his heart start beating again. He ran to her side and pulled her into his arms. "Are you okay?" He needed to know she hadn't been hit. He ran his hands up and down her arms, her legs, looking for any sign of injury.

"I'm fine. The bullets just missed my head."

"Oh, thank God," he whispered, dragging her closer to his beating heart.

"I hate to break this up, but our enemy is right outside that door. They have us trapped. You have any brilliant ideas, Sebastian?" Rafe asked.

"There's an escape tunnel. It leads deep into the woods—about a mile from the house."

"Is that how everyone managed to get out?" asked Catalina.

"I assume so. Blake knew about the passage. He's the one who told me about it though I've never needed to use it."

"Then I suggest we gather our two prisoners and head through the tunnel. We need to get out of here. Now!"

Sebastian led the way to the library and over to the bookshelf on the east wall. Feeling along the seam, he released a latch and the bookshelf swung outward showing a narrow escape tunnel. "Take Catalina. I'll be right behind you."

"I'm not leaving without you."

"Yes, you are. Don't argue with me about this. It's you they're after, you they're wanting." Sebastian could feel her anger at his demands. She was hurt that he didn't want her fighting by his side. "Do this for me, baby. I swear I'll be right behind you."

Catalina nodded, though he knew she did so reluctantly. There would be hell to pay later, but at least this way there would be a later for them.

Once Catalina and the two Were-cats entered the passage, Sebastian sealed it behind them. He turned toward the library door when he heard Lobo growl. A loud thud followed by the unmistakable sound of breaking glass caught his attention. They were trying to break into his home. With his extraordinary hearing, Sebastian listened in on the conversation outside his front door.

"I'm telling you, she ran into the house. There are only three of them and five of us. We outnumber them."

"Yeah, but they know we're out here. They'll be prepared for an attack."

"I'm going in, with or without you."

"You're a fool. We're not going to get her tonight. I say we come back with reinforcements.

When we started out tonight, there were nine of us, not counting the two we had planted inside. We're down to five and who knows what happened to our spies. They could already be dead for all we know."

"We have orders, Wilson."

"I don't give a damn about the orders, Taylor. You want to die, you go ahead. I'm out of here."

The man named Wilson must have walked off because Sebastian heard Taylor muttering.

"Maybe Wilson is right, Taylor. They said no one would be expecting this attack so soon after we hit the Donovan house."

"Stop your whining, you wimp. We're wasting time."

"Fine, if you want to die, go right ahead. I'm leaving with Wilson."

Sebastian heard footsteps heading away from the house and knew the remaining men would be coming through his door any minute. He needed to get William and get the hell out of Dodge. Sebastian took the stairs two at a time until he reached the third floor. When he opened the door, he found William wide-awake, struggling with his bonds. "You aren't going anywhere."

"You won't get away. You know that, don't you?"

"I think you've got the situation backward, William. You won't be going anywhere. And just

to ensure that you don't, I have something for you." Sebastian walked over to the dressing table and reached inside, hoping the tranquilizer gun that Blake had placed inside it earlier that morning was still there. When he felt the heavy weight of the barrel, he sighed in relief.

With no time to waste, he pulled it out of the drawer, whirled around to the prisoner, and released one of the darts. Seconds later William once again succumbed to unconsciousness. Sebastian reached into the drawer and pulled out the pack of darts that had been prepared for just this sort of emergency. After reloading the tranquilizer gun and grabbing up his prisoner, he headed back down the stairs.

He had just reached the first floor landing when he heard the ominous sound of the front door cracking. He had only seconds to spare. He jumped down the flight of stairs, landing on the balls of his feet as the first man entered the house. He raced toward the entry, hoping to dodge into the Library before they caught sight of him.

Luck was not with him. He was within three feet of the library door when they spotted him. Three men dressed all in black camouflage and grease paint stood in his entryway. "Don't just stand there," the man Sebastian knew as Taylor said. "Fire!"

With no time to lose, Sebastian lifted his arm

and aimed, shooting the leader in the neck with one of the darts. The man holding the gun backed up a step, bumping into the mercenary standing behind him. "Shit, no one said anything about them being armed!"

"You really are a wimp," the third man said. "We have our orders." He growled in disgust and shoved the trembling man aside.

As the traitor tried to run out the door, Sebastian took aim and fired again. He couldn't allow anyone else to escape. He dropped William to the floor to keep his hands free.

"I'm not afraid of you or your kind," the third man blustered.

"You should be," Sebastian said calmly. He wouldn't allow his emotions to rule him right now. His first priority was to see to it that none of these men survived the night. He couldn't risk them reporting their failure to their leader, not until they'd managed to flee the area.

"You're nothing but a curse put upon this earth. It will be my pleasure to rid the world of your kind."

"Enough with the melodrama already." Sebastian took aim and fired, bringing the man down without mercy. He just wished it were bullets in his gun rather than tranquilizers. At least now, they had more prisoners to interrogate.

Sebastian stepped over to the three fallen men

and dragged them the rest of the way inside the house, then propped the broken door in the doorjamb. The smartest thing he could do at this point would be to call to Catalina and have the others join him. He may be Loup-garou, but he couldn't transport four unconscious men by himself. Not that the house was the most secure place in the world. But what choice did he really have? Baby? Did everyone get out safe?

Yes, Sebastian. Where are you?

I had trouble at the house. I need help guarding some trespassers.

We'll be right there. We found Sam and the others.

Good. I don't know how secure this place is. We need to load into vehicles and get the hell out of here. Any word yet on the others that left to hunt the traitors?

Nothing.

Sebastian nodded, knowing that chances were good that some may have been injured or taken captive.

It took fifteen minutes for the others to return. Fifteen minutes that Sebastian and Lobo stood guard at the front door, waiting. There was still no word on the other three teams they'd sent out in search of the traitors. They should have reported in by now.

Sebastian felt Catalina's approach even before he heard the squeak of the hidden door, but still he didn't leave his position. He wasn't about to chance one of his prisoners waking up and making a run for it.

Catalina left the library and headed toward Sebastian. He held out his arms and nestled her against his body for a quick hug. He could tell she was still pissed at him, but at least he knew she was safe. Sam, Keenan and Blake followed her into the hallway. "We left the women in the passageway," said Sam. "Although Catalina insisted she should accompany us."

"Damn it. They broke my door," Cat yelled as she stomped over to look at the damage, kicking the nearest prisoner as she passed. Lobo snapped his teeth and snarled at the unconscious prisoners, voicing his own anger at the attackers.

Sebastian smiled. At least she'd directed her anger at someone other than at him. There wasn't enough time to try to soothe her nerves. They needed to find the others and burn Thomas's body. Then they needed to leave, and quickly, before enemy reinforcements arrived. Sebastian turned to the others. "Any word on Jack and the rest of the teams?"

Sam and Blake shook their heads while Keenan seemed to be looking inward. "I feel Jack, Terry and Christopher close by. The other two I can't feel at all," Keenan added.

"The shooters may have taken them out," said Blake. He also examined the damage done to the front door. "I suggest we call the others to us and hope for the best," said Sam. "Do we know if any of the attackers escaped?"

Sebastian grimaced. "At least two took off before the others stormed the house." Walking over to the front door, he removed it from its frame. Three wolves exited the woods just as he went to stand on the front porch. Each dragged a prisoner by their pant leg toward the house. None of the mercenaries looked like they'd fared well against their opponent.

The wolves looked at each other, then at Sebastian as though asking if everything was all right. Sebastian nodded and waved them in. They dragged the prisoners to the bottom step of the porch, left them in a pile and bounded inside, jumping over the three men Sebastian had taken down with the Tranq gun.

"They must have sensed time was of the essence. They didn't say a word after dropping their captives," said Catalina.

Sebastian nodded. "They know we need to leave, Cat. They're probably going to shift and change back into their street clothes."

"Well," said Sam, "it looks like we have several prisoners to interrogate. Hopefully, they'll provide some much needed information."

"Let's hope they know something," Blake interjected. "But if it were me, I'd never tell my

underlings everything, just so that no one could divulge all the details of my plans."

Sebastian had to agree. He better not have had his home invaded and shot up for nothing. He wanted answers and he wanted them now. Unfortunately, their prisoners would be unconscious for several hours longer. Sebastian had just leaned over the newest prisoners, making sure they were still alive when Jack approached.

"Sebastian? Sam? There's something inside I think you should see."

From the tone of Jack's voice, it couldn't be good.

## Chapter Nineteen

"Blake? Can you stand guard over this bunch?"

"You've got it, Sebastian."

Sebastian nodded at Jack to lead the way once Blake arrived on the front porch. "What is it you've found, Jack?" he asked, already knowing that the news couldn't be good.

"It's what I didn't find, Sebastian."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't have a working telephone. How exactly did William and Thomas contact the person pulling their strings?"

"Something tells me you already know the answer to that."

Jack nodded, his eyes clouded with worry. He pulled Bastian and Sam into the kitchen, careful no one could overhear. "I found this." He held out his hand to show them the small device covered in blood.

Sebastian looked at the tiny transmitter sitting

in the palm of Jack's hand. "Where did you find it?" His stomach tightened as he looked at the bloody transmitter again. He had a bad feeling about this.

"After considerable persuasion, I managed to get one of the bears to talk after I caught up with him."

Sebastian looked at Jack's knuckles, the dried blood evidence of exactly how he'd persuaded the Were-bear to talk. "What did he tell you?"

"That the others were listening in. Everything we planned, they knew. He said we had no hope of escaping them for what we knew so did they and they had the means to get there first."

"Where did you find the bug?"

"I figured there had to be a way for them to be transmitting even while changed. If I wanted to hide a transmitter on my person and I might have to change, where would I put it? It only made sense that it had to be inside of him."

"How did you find it?"

"I looked for recent scars. Used my claws to open the wound and dug it out."

"Is it functional?"

Jack shrugged. "I don't know. It could very well stop transmitting once it leaves the body it's planted in, but I have no idea how to check if it's functional or not. For safety sake, we have to assume they're still operational. I stepped on this

one, cracking it down the middle to prevent someone listening in while I discuss this with you."

Sam crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. "Is that why you're telling us out of sight of the prisoners?"

"Yes, they could all have one of these transmitters."

Running a hand through his hair, Sebastian sighed. "That could explain how the humans knew there were only five of them left, they could hear somehow or the transmitters stop functioning when the wearer's heart stops. But how is that possible?"

"I don't know how any of this is possible, Sebastian. I get more and more confused the more we learn."

"The man who ordered the other to shoot me must have a receiver on him and if he does, then so does the one controlling him and the others that are still out there busily hunting us."

"Who knows how many of our people have these transmitters, Sebastian. It's the perfect way to keep a spy hidden within your ranks. Scars litter our bodies. Who'd notice one more, other than our mates, perhaps?"

"It could also explain how they catch up with Samantha so quickly. They could have planted a transmitter on her when she was rapedsomewhere she couldn't easily see."

Sebastian heard Jack suck in a breath. He should have known better than to bring up her rape again. It had to be rough on the man, knowing that your mate had been hurt in such a way and you could do nothing to prevent it. After clearing his throat, he decided to change the subject.

Sam tilted his head and narrowed his eyes then nodded as if coming to some decision. "Sebastian, I want you and Jack to go find that receiver. Then at least we'll know where the rest of their men are located right now. It will sure make it easier tracking the ones that are still unaccounted for."

They nodded their agreement and the pair headed back to the front entry. Catalina and Keenan stood leaning against the doorframe, looking out into the night. Just seeing Catalina in one piece, looking so elegant and composed even in his baggy sweats and too-large T-shirt had Sebastian's blood humming. He needed her again, soon. She was everything to him. He couldn't lose her to these lunatics, he wouldn't.

Sam watched them as they made their way to the unconscious mercenaries.

Squatting in front of the prisoners, Sebastian met Blake's gaze, held his finger up to his lips, letting him know not to speak, then bent down to the man who'd been issuing orders.

He quickly patted the pockets of the man's flak vest and pulled out a handheld mobile GPS device. He studied the screen. A bunch of dots were grouped together, unmoving, while five other dots moved north away from the estate. They had five more people to hunt down. Three traitors and the two humans the man spoke of. At least the numbers added up. They didn't appear to have any more traitors amongst them.

Sebastian handed the GPS device to Sam and let him draw his own conclusions.

Sam raised his eyebrows when Jack held out the tiny transmitter he still gripped in his hand. It didn't take him long to put the puzzle pieces together.

"Blake," he called.

Sebastian wasn't surprised to hear the anger in Sam's voice. It pissed him off, too. Someone with a great deal of money had gone to a whole lot of trouble to track them down. Now they needed to find out why and do something about it, before more of their people were hunted down and captured.

Both Catalina and Keenan turned at Sam's bellow. Neither had heard him take that tone before. Sam wasn't always calm and happy, especially when his people were in danger.

Blake didn't waste any time in responding to the call. "Yes, Sam?" There was no mistaking the curiosity in his voice.

"Go with Sebastian and Jack. They have something to tell you. When you're through, I want you to search and destroy."

Blake raised his brow at that, but nodded and followed Jack and Sebastian out of the room. Keenan and Catalina exchanged glances, then shrugged before moving to the front porch to watch over the traitors lying on the ground at the foot of the steps.

\* \* \* \*

Catalina closed her eyes, remembering the night she'd spent with Sebastian, before the enemy had invaded her home. She would find happiness in her home again. They wouldn't take that from her.

What was going on anyway? Her mate knew and what he did, she would soon learn as well. No time like the present to get some answers. Sebastian? What's going on? What did Jack tell you? Even holding a conversation with her mate, her senses were on alert. No one would get the drop on them again and live to tell about it.

We discovered how they're tracking us. Or rather how they're tracking themselves.

Excuse me?

I'll explain everything in a minute.

You better. Why were men such autocratic fools

sometimes, she wondered. It's not as if he couldn't have simply told her. Why make her wait? She grunted, disgusted with her wayward emotions.

I can feel your anger, baby. I'm not trying to shut you out. I just have a lot going on in my mind right now and I want to make sense of it before I tell you all I've learned.

Catalina conceded he had a point. Sometimes she needed time to digest news. It made sense that her mate would need the same as well. She sighed. I understand. When you're ready to talk it through, I'll be here to listen to you.

Thanks for understanding. I love you.

I love you, too. Now, finish what you're doing and come out here. I need to feel your arms around me. And dammit, she had a right to be pissed. They'd destroyed her front door, the barbarians. She needed Sebastian to hold her, to take away the pain at seeing her brand new home treated this way. This was supposed to be her retreat, somewhere where only happiness resided.

"We'll fix the door, baby."

Not caring that the others watched, she walked up to her mate, wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head against his beating heart. "How did you know what I was thinking about?"

"You were staring at that door frame like you'd just lost all your dreams. It wasn't hard to figure out. Besides, I have easy access to your thoughts, remember?"

Catalina playfully punched him in the arm and took a step backward. She glanced one last time at her door before turning her back, disgusted with the fact that she could no nothing to fix it. "Does anyone have a cell phone? We need to arrange for the house to be secured and an alarm put in."

"Here, use mine," Keenan said from behind her.

She smiled and whispered her thanks as she dialed.

"Who are you calling?" Sebastian asked, curious about what she was up to.

"I just had a thought. Perhaps Samantha might have tried to contact me through some friends of mine I have here in the States or sent them something to hold for me."

"That's smart thinking."

She could hear the pride and love in his voice, could feel it in her heart. It was like a warm balm flowing through her. Even now, she wondered at the way fate worked. She'd searched for years for him and happenstance had ended up bringing them together. If he hadn't been searching for her sister, it may have been years before they had met. By then, she might have settled down to live her life alone with only Lobo as a companion. Speaking of Lobo? Where in the hell was he? She didn't have long to think on that before the phone on the other end began ringing.

"Hello," came the groggy voice on the other end of the line.

Damn! She'd forgotten what time it was. "Sorry to call so late, Sharon. This is Catalina."

"Well, hi, girlfriend. Did you make it back to Spain all right?"

"Yes, but there's been some trouble. Look, you haven't heard from Erica, have you? Or received anything in the mail?"

"Funny you should mention that. I got a package in the mail this morning. She addressed it to me so I opened it. I left a message on your machine a couple of hours ago. There's a sealed manila envelope with your name on it."

Catalina's heart stopped. *Oh, shit!* "Get out of the house. Now. Go somewhere you've never been before."

"What are you talking about, Cat?"

"Look, there's been an attack on my family. I think they may have bugged my home phone. Gather up your things and get out."

"You're really scaring me. Why would they come after me?"

"The package. My sister mailed you something in hopes I would receive it." Catalina had to think a moment. How was she going to get that package from Sharon without drawing attention to herself and the others? "You know that place you always dreamed of going?" Catalina asked.

"Yes, what about it."

"I'll meet you there tomorrow. Two days from now at the latest. Bring the package with you. Plan on being gone a couple of weeks."

"How the hell am I supposed to get there? I make barely enough to live on." There was a slight pause, then Sharon sighed. "I'll just have to borrow money from my folks. I'll meet you tomorrow, the next day if I can't get the money in time to make a flight tomorrow."

"Give me your account number. Money will be wired into it as soon as the banks open."

As though reading her mind again, Sebastian walked up to her with a pad and pen. How he'd managed to find it so quickly, she could only guess. She smiled at him and wrote down the numbers her friend recited. "Remember, I'll be waiting for you when you get there."

"I have to call in. Let the boss know where I'll be at."

"Just tell Roger you've had a family emergency. No one can know where you're going, Sharon. Promise me this stays between the two of us. It's the safest thing for your friends and family. What they don't know, can't hurt them." She could practically hear her friend's mind working. She'd want some answers when they met up.

"Fine. As this trip's on you I'll do as you ask, but you owe me some explanations."

"I'll tell you what I can." It wouldn't be the truth. No one could know about her people. She'd have to think of something between now and then. She disconnected her call and glanced up. "Is he doing what I think he's doing?" she asked Sebastian, her finger pointing at Blake.

"Yes, I believe he is."

"Is this the point where you tell me what's going on?"

"Almost. First, I take it that your friend has something that belongs to you?"

"Yes, she received it in this morning's mail. Why is Blake stripping all the unconscious men? Not that I don't like looking at naked male flesh, but is this appropriate behavior?"

Sebastian snorted. "He's looking for something."

"And you're not going to tell me what it is?"

He's looking for transmitters. They implanted them under their skin so he's looking for fresh scars. We can't let them know where we're going.

I see. This is why you won't speak aloud. Makes sense, but you could have told me sooner.

I know. Play along.

What?

Just play along.

Catalina sighed, exasperated with the man, but he usually had a good reason for the things he asked of her. Catalina nodded and decided to go along with whatever Sebastian and the others had cooked up.

"You don't need to know everything, Catalina. Let me take care of things for a while. You have enough on your plate worrying about your sister."

"I'm not the little woman to be coddled, Sebastian. I thought you had more respect for me than that."

"It's not about respect, baby. I just want you to stay safe. Just leave the details to me."

"You don't trust me, that's it, isn't it?"

"Of course, I trust you. Don't be silly. Look, we'll be heading to meet your friend soon. Why don't you go upstairs and get some rest before we have to leave."

Catalina got it. They wanted her to lead them in the wrong direction. Maybe buy them a little time. It was a smart move. One she hoped their enemy wouldn't expect. "True. I can't wait to see Paris. I just wish this trip were under different circumstances. Sharon and I must have planned our trip there a dozen times over the years. We planned on going to the top of the Eiffel Tower to look down on all the little people scurrying beneath us."

"We'll go back after everything is settled. The important thing is to get that package before the others do."

Where is it that you're meeting, baby? We're going to Arizona to see the Grand Canyon.

Um, baby, what's stopping them from following her? Oh, damn! I didn't think that far ahead. Catalina wasted no time in calling her friend back. The phone rang and rang. There was no way her friend could have packed up and taken off so quickly. What had she done? When she'd given up hope that her friend would answer, she raised her gaze to her mate. She was about to hang up the phone when she heard her friend's voice come over the line.

"Hello?" Sharon's voice quaked.

"Oh, Thank God you're all right."

"In a manner of speaking."

"What?"

"I'm afraid I won't be able to leave now, Catalina. Something has come up."

Before Catalina could respond, there was a harsh yell in the background, followed by a sharp slap and a pained cry. Catalina bit her lip to keep from screaming into the phone. What in the hell were they supposed to do now?

Seconds later a male spoke into the phone, his voice harsh. "If you want your friend to live, then bring your ass here tomorrow afternoon at two o'clock with everything your sister turned over to you. Come alone or I'll slit her throat the second I sense your companions."

Before she could respond, a soft snick on the other end of the line told her he'd hung up.

Trembling, Catalina met Sebastian's worried gaze. "What is it, Cat?"

She could feel all eyes focused on her. How could she ask any of them to put their lives on the line for a stranger, a human when humans were tracking them? Yet how could she not?

Catalina quietly handed the phone back to Keenan, her eyes filled with sorrow. Glancing at the trussed up prisoners, Cat jerked her head and pointed toward the living room. What she had to tell everyone needed to be said away from their captives. Looking at the group gathered around her, she settled her gaze on Keenan. "Can you stand guard here while I talk to Sam and the others?" When he nodded, she gave him a weak smile. "They'll fill you in later."

Once she led her mate, Sam, and the others to the living room, she swallowed thickly, her voice heavy with the pain in her soul. "They have her. They have Sharon and it's all my fault. If I don't turn myself over to them, they'll kill her."

"We'll get her back," vowed Sam.

"You'll be walking straight into a trap, Sam. They know I'll come after her. But I can't help but think that even if I followed their directions by showing up alone, they'll kill her anyway just to keep her from telling the authorities anything."

"Then we have nothing to lose by going with you and perhaps everything to gain. Sharon may

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not be Were, but she's friends with my sister. I won't abandon her to them."

## Chapter Twenty

Catalina looked from one man to another until she'd met the eyes of all of them. Everyone wore the same mutinous expression. "You can't just walk into a trap. It's plain suicide."

"It's only a trap if you don't know about it,

There was a note in Sebastian's voice she'd never heard before. It was more than grim determination, more than pigheaded stubbornness. Murderous rage couldn't begin to describe it. Perhaps ice-cold hatred was closer to the truth. It sent goose bumps rushing up and down her arms and made her heart skitter in alarm. She hoped never to be on the receiving end of his anger.

"I think your mates might have something to say about this, gentlemen." She didn't want her man walking into a trap either. It wasn't worth the risk. Yet she couldn't leave her friend in the hands of maniacs either. "That's right," said Alyssa. "There has to be a way to rescue her without you guys being involved."

"I thought I told you to wait in the passageway," Blake scolded.

Sam turned to see Elizabeth and Cerri standing in the hallway behind them, the children in their baby carriers at their feet. "I gave you all orders. You could have walked into a battle with the children."

"We were monitoring you. If we were in immediate danger we would have felt it through our mating bonds, Sam."

"That's not the point, Elizabeth."

"You can yell at me later. Right now we have to figure out a way to rescue Catalina's friend without exposing any of us to capture." Elizabeth pointedly looked down at the children and then laid the hammer blow to the men's plans to rescue the girl. "The children need both their parents."

Catalina smiled. What could the men say to that? It was the truth.

Don't get all high on yourself, Cat. We don't have children.

Catalina scowled. He had a point. There has to be a smarter way to go about this.

Sebastian nodded. "We use their technology against them. There will be a range on this thing. If we get close enough, we can see exactly what

we're up against. If we remove the transmitters from all their men here, everyone would probably assume they didn't survive the attack."

Sam nodded his approval. His eyes grew speculative. "I see where you're going with this."

"I thought you would." At Catalina's blank stare, he continued his explanation. "If they think their men have all been killed, they won't know that we've found out how they're planting spies amongst us. We can use their own GPS tracker to locate their people without them knowing we've discovered its significance."

Catalina nodded her understanding, but before she could ask her question, Cerri beat her to the punch. "How does that keep you out of danger?"

Rafe was the one who answered. "Because we can pick them off one or two at a time, whenever they are isolated from others. It's not a foolproof plan, but it's inherently less risky than going to battle like we usually do, never knowing where are enemy is hiding, standing ready to ambush us."

Jack took that moment to rejoin them, having accompanied Blake as he looked over the naked bodies of the rest of their captives for additional transmitters. "From the look of things, they all have a bug implanted in them."

"Then remove them. We'll leave when you're finished."

"You got it, Sam." Jack nodded and headed back to the first of the prisoners. "It's a good thing I always carry my scalpel and suture kit with me," he said as he shook his head and lifted the first of the men over his shoulder.

"That won't be necessary, Jack. Cerri and I can remove the devices without shedding a drop of blood and it will be much quicker."

Jack shrugged knowing that he could trust this man's word. "Be my guest," he said before turning to Sebastian. "Where do you want us to set up?"

"Just leave them where they lie, for all I care," Sebastian muttered.

Keenan just shook his head, "There's no need to move them. For what Cerri and I need to do, we won't need privacy."

Catalina considered the mated bears with interest. "What exactly are you going to do?" She knew first hand these two could work miracles, but how could they to remove the transmitters without cutting them out?

Cerri's smile wreathed her lips, lighting her face and giving it a warmth and beauty Catalina had rarely seen in another living soul. "Magic," she answered.

Catalina believed it.

As one, the two Were-bears moved over to where Jack still stood, the prisoner draped over his shoulder. "Go ahead and set him down. Where

is his implant?"

"They all seem to be in the same place. Left front shoulder."

"That'll save time." Keenan reached for Cerri's hand and together they placed their linked palms over the man's barely healed scar.

A bright yellow glow spread out from their hands to encompass the man's shoulder. Catalina gasped at the display. Intellectually, she knew they'd healed her in the same way, but seeing it while fully aware was another thing entirely. The power these two wielded amazed her.

Seconds later, Cerri pulled her hand away, revealing the small transmitter that had been sewn beneath the man's skin. Without taking a break, they moved from one man to the next, making sure to get not only the men outside and lying just inside the front door. They would take no chances with the discovery of their plan before it could be set in motion.

After they were finished, Catalina looked on the pair in awe. Such incredible feats, and she'd witnessed them. Why she should be surprised after their healing session with her, she didn't know. Still, it amazed her.

"Incredible, isn't it?" Sebastian whispered in her ear.

Catalina swallowed convulsively, her voice a wisp of sound as she looked at the swaying pair.

"They did that for me. Such a gift must also be a burden. Look how pale they've gotten."

"They wouldn't have offered if they didn't think it necessary."

Catalina nodded, and then looked at the group of men lying across her once polished floors. "Here's a stupid question. How are we going to transport all these people to your plane?"

Sebastian laughed. "Not as stupid as you think. I'm trying to figure out the same thing."

They stirred as the sound of fussing babies carried across the room. As one, the small menagerie of children began to whimper.

"Do they plan that?" Sebastian asked, speaking to no one in particular.

Alyssa smiled and let a small chuckle escape. "It seems they can't stand to see one another in distress. It's an endless source of entertainment for Blake when they all demand to be fed at once."

Blake shook his head at Catalina, then turned to Sebastian. "I think we have a way to get these men out of here unnoticed. Didn't I see a pickup truck in the back of this monstrosity you call a house?"

Sebastian nodded. "You suggest tossing them in the back and driving off with them?"

"It works for me. They'll be out for a couple of hours longer with the dose of Ketamine they received. They won't stir. We'll need to cover them with a tarp or blanket of some kind." "I hate to burst your bubble," a voice from the end of the hall called out. "But there are still two of us unaccounted for and five of their men out there."

"You're right, Christopher. We need to gather up the rest of the traitors and track down those men before we can leave." Sam turned to Sebastian who still held the GPS device in his hand. "Where are they now, Sebastian?"

Sebastian stared at the green glowing screen, concentrating on the red dots. "They seem to be huddled in a group. They aren't far from here. Maybe they think they can regroup and catch us unaware."

"I'd like to see them try," Rafe growled. Catalina watched as Melissa tentatively laid her hand on his arm, her attempt at soothing the savage beast. The gesture seemed too intimate to witness so she turned her head away and concentrated on the others around her.

"My brother is missing. I'm not leaving without him." This came from the quiet man sitting on the steps leading upstairs. From the miserable look in his eyes, he must not be able to connect with his brother using their telepathic bond.

"We're not leaving without everyone, Terry. We'll find both your brother and James," Sam said, compassion thickening his voice.

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, a group consisting of Sam, Keenan, Blake and Terry approached the area where the GPS showed the men still huddled together. Sam wasn't surprised to see their enemies poking and prodding two bloody corpses. From Terry's indrawn breath he'd obviously been hoping for the best—that his brother had cut off mental contact with him to concentrate on the hunt.

"Easy," Sam whispered barely loud enough for their small group to hear. "If you can't tell, it looks like your brother and James took out the three bears before they were brought down by these two. They served our people well."

"You think that means shit to me, sir? They murdered my brother," he said in a furious hiss.

"And they are about to pay with their lives for doing so. Spread out. We approach them from all directions, surround and then destroy. Do it quickly and quietly. A broken neck will do. We don't have time for anything more elaborate though they deserve it."

Everyone nodded their agreement and faded into the woods, leaving Sam wondering about the others at the house. He reached for Elizabeth. Over a year together and it still seemed liked everything was new and precious. She and the children were more important than anything in

his life, save his sister. And even she couldn't take his mate's place in his heart.

What are you doing in that big spooky house?

Waiting on you to come back to me. I just fed the boys and am anxious to get out of here.

*I understand.* Sam gathered his courage, then gave her the distressing news. *We're approaching the mercenaries now. Our team didn't survive.* 

A short silence spilled between them. Finally, she answered. He could feel the heaviness in her heart at their people's loss. *Do what you must, then come back to me.* 

Sam smiled as he crouched less than ten feet from the two men who were still poking and prodding the dead Weres. He adored Elizabeth. Even when she knew he would kill, she didn't hold it against him. *I'll be there shortly*. Sam pulled from his mate's mind. He didn't want to expose her to the coming violence. He sucked in an anguished breath, then stood, showing himself to the enemy.

Before the mercenaries could raise their sniper rifles to target him, Blake and Terry stepped up behind them and quickly wrenched their necks, killing them instantly.

"That was a pretty stupid move, if I do say so, Sam."

Sam turned his head to the right, not surprised to see Keenan standing just behind his shoulder, ready to push him out of the way if the need arose. "I had to get their attention, Keenan. I knew you all wouldn't let anything happen to me. This was the simplest and most efficient way of solving our problems."

Keenan looked at the fallen Weres, one of which was a member of Cerri's original pack. "I know it. But if your mate finds out what you did, she's going to kill you."

"You don't have to sound so pleased about it."

"We all have to find our happiness where we can."

Sam shook his head, exasperated by the gentle giant. "Smartass."

Keenan jerked his head in Terry's direction. "He's not taking this well. You have to watch him. He's going to be trouble, that one. The only thing running through his mind right now are thoughts of revenge. He could become a liability."

"I'll keep him on the plane guarding the prisoners and the women. He can keep you company."

Keenan put in hands in his pockets and nodded. Sam didn't have to tell him the real reason he needed to stay on the plane. He was a pilot. If trouble came knocking, he could get everyone out of the area quickly. Keenan would sacrifice his own life before anyone would hurt their mates and children. Sam trusted him with his

life, his future, and they both knew it.

Sam watched as Terry stiffly walked over to where his brother's body lay in a heap upon the ground, gingerly lifting him out of the blood that had pooled beneath him. With infinite tenderness, he cradled his kin against his chest and started walking back the way they'd come.

The three remaining Weres exchanged solemn glances. "Let's clean this mess up." Sam headed toward James' ravaged body and lifted him into his arms. Keenan and Blake each grabbed a fallen enemy, placing them over their shoulders in a Fireman's carry before silently following Terry and Sam. Intent on reaching their mates, they picked up their pace. They needed to hold them close, needed to assure themselves that their women were safe.

## Chapter Twenty-One

hat happened to the second team?" the insidious voice hissed on the other end of the line.

The watcher swallowed convulsively. There was a time when his master had sent spirals of fear winging down his spine, but that was before he met the one who now controlled his every action, his every thought—The Creator. The terror the Creator made him feel made his hands shake. He tightened his grip on the phone. "They disappeared. Charred remains were found on the property."

"You know what to do."

A decisive click echoed loudly in his ear. Yes, he knew what to do. It was time to kill the master, to put the final phase of the true plan into action. The watcher stepped away from the payphone and pulled his collar up over his ears to block the wind. A storm was brewing and only the righteous would survive.

Without a backward glance, the watcher headed for his Jeep, confident that nothing could stop what lay ahead.

\* \* \* \*

The entire team dressed in black for the occasion. Nothing mattered but to see that justice be done. From the looks on the faces of the ones gathered, nothing would stop them from meeting their objective. Determination spilled from their pores. The air thickened with the increased tension in the cargo van. The time was at hand. The group looked from one to another, knowing that tonight they would do what they needed to. As one, the six two-man teams left the vehicle and moved into position to await orders to go in.

Sebastian felt Catalina tense next to him. All his senses went on alert. "What is it?"

"We have movement," she whispered.

Behind him, Jack stirred. Tonight he was a man intent on locating his mate. Sebastian didn't fault him for his anger. It was Jack's right to see to her protection, her happiness, just as it was her right to see to his. Bastian prayed answers lay behind the barred door ahead of them. "Where and how many?" Sebastian asked.

"Looks like two of them, heading out the back door."

"Must be time for a cigarette break," Jack growled.

"Blake and Sam are closer to their position." Sebastian keyed the microphone that he wore next to his mouth. "Two coming out of the rear of the house."

A burst of static exploded across the headset, followed by a gruff, "We see them." No one moved as they waited for the signal that the targets were eliminated. An unearthly silence hung in the air. Thunder boomed in the distance and the earth shook as lightning pierced the sky, striking the ground nearby.

Sebastian felt Catalina jump. Her anxiety, her worry for her friend, hung heavy in the air. The fact that a sudden storm had materialized over them an hour earlier didn't help her unease. "Relax, baby. We'll get her out of there."

"Yeah, I know. But in the meantime, what are they doing to her? What did they do to her already? They've had her nearly twenty-four hours."

"I won't make you empty promises. I don't know what they've done to her, but whatever it is, we'll see she has help dealing with it." Sebastian wished he could guarantee that her friend was okay. He hated seeing Catalina's eyes filled with misery, hated to hear her voice quiver with pain. Hell, he couldn't even tell her if her friend still

lived.

After keying his mike, Sebastian looked from Catalina to Jack, then spoke hurriedly. "Three outside patrols heading toward your location, Team Two."

Static burst over the headset. Rafe answered, his disgust and anger coming through the receiver in waves. "Got them in our sights."

No one had met the Were-cat hunting with Rafe before tonight, but he seemed to have every confidence in his handpicked team member. Sebastian just hoped they could get the job done with a minimum of fuss and noise.

A few minutes passed, then a throaty growl came over the headphones. "Outside perimeter secure."

Another few seconds passed before Team One checked in. "Targets one and two eliminated."

Sebastian sighed in relief. Five down, five more to go—the five still inside the house. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Catalina shudder in relief, then snap her gaze back to the GPS unit she held.

She raised her eyes to Bastian. "We have movement in the woods. Looks like the three mercenaries patrolling outside are on their way in."

"They must have gotten word that two of their comrades aren't reporting in," Jack hissed.

Sebastian had to agree. Either that or someone knew they were there. At this point, it could be either scenario.

After what seemed liked hours, but couldn't have been more than five minutes, Catalina picked up movement. This time, however, it wasn't coming from the group inside as expected. Several new green dots were moving in on the Weres from outside the perimeter. A second team must have been waiting on standby. Good thing they'd all learned their lesson from previous attacks, and had prepared for such an eventuality. "Teams Four, Five, Six, movement heading your way. I count ten targets heading your way."

Now all they could do was wait until their teams reported in. The seconds stretched into minutes and still no word came over the headsets. Finally, after an eternity, static crackled in their ears. "All targets have been eliminated, but we have one man down. I repeat, one man down."

Sebastian swallowed back the curse boiling in his throat. They knew going into this thing that losses were possible. It didn't make it any easier to accept though. "We're heading your way, Team Five."

Catalina shook her head, her eyes focused on the GPS device. Sebastian looked over her shoulder. "Negative, Sam. Two more heading your way from inside." "Understood."

A few minutes later, the receiver crackled, warning of an incoming transmission. "This is Team Five. Second wave reinforcements eliminated."

Sebastian looked over at Catalina, waited for her signal. With her nod signaling the area was clear, Sebastian spoke into the microphone. "Teams Three and Four, take your secondary positions. Teams Five and Six, stand firm."

Sam's voice filtered through the headset three minutes later. "Outside perimeter secure."

"Location check."

"Team One, south side of the house, near rear door. No visible targets."

"Team Two, west side. Four targets visible in the living room. Appears victim is still alive. I repeat, victim still alive, but badly beaten."

Catalina gasped. "Sebastian?"

"No, we stay here until the area is secure." Her eyes pleaded with him to let her go to her friend, but he couldn't take the chance. Not yet.

"Team Three, east side. Kitchen appears empty."

"Team Four, north side. View of living room confirms Team Two's assessment. Enemy is heavily armed and getting nervous."

"Any movement, Sebastian?" Sam asked.

"Negative. It's a go for entry."

"Understood."

Parked down the street from the house, inside a steel gray utility van, Catalina and Sebastian jumped as the rear doors flew open. "Jack, where are you going?" demanded Sebastian.

"I'm going in with the rest of them. If anything happens, I can control what the enemy does. We can't take the chance of something going wrong."

Sebastian should have known Jack wouldn't be able to sit by twiddling his thumbs. Let him go or order him to stay? What other options were there? There really wasn't a choice. Sebastian nodded. Jack didn't wait around, disappearing into the fog that had rolled in out of nowhere.

"Was that wise, Sebastian?" Catalina asked.

"He would've gone in no matter what I said."

She nodded, her eyes taking on a far away expression.

"What is it, baby?" he asked, not liking the emotions he could feel pouring out of her.

"I'm worried—about Sharon, about Samantha. So many things could go wrong."

He couldn't resist the plea in her eyes, her voice any longer. As gently as he could, he pulled her into his arms, giving her the comfort her soul cried out for. "We may not be able to do anything about your sister right this minute, but we'll save Sharon."

"You promise?"

"Yes, baby. It's a promise." He just hoped everything went off without a hitch.

\* \* \* \*

Jack skirted the edge of the property, staying low to the ground to avoid detection by those inside. He could feel their tension. It thickened the very air, spreading out into the night, like the fog that had rolled in out of nowhere. Goose bumps stretched across his skin and a chill ran down his spine. He could feel the evil in these men's minds, could feel their depravity. It sickened him. He knew what he must do.

Without hesitation, he merged his mind with the men inside, seizing their thoughts, their memories, and leaving behind agonizing pain the likes of which they could never had imagined. Jack shuddered, hating inflicting such pain, but knowing it was the only way to ensure their enemy would answer any question asked. He would show them no mercy, and when they had answers to all their questions, he'd give them death. He hated using this ability, knew having such a talent made him a freak amongst their kind. But what choice did he really have? None, if he wanted to ensure his mate's friend didn't come to any more harm. It took but moments more to reach Sam's and Blake's position. "I've taken care

of the men inside. They can't put up a fight."

"What are you doing out here, Jack?" Sam asked, his voice laced with the authority he wore as King of the Loup-garou.

"I need to be in there. I need to hear for myself what they plan for my mate. I couldn't just sit back and wait."

After a lengthy pause, Sam nodded, obviously understanding what Jack couldn't put into words. The love for a mate, even one you'd only met in your dreams was all-encompassing. Samantha was his and he'd do whatever it took to bring her home to him.

They were only a few feet from the back door when a wave of darkness washed through Jack, almost bringing him to his knees. It took a moment for his brain to register and interpret what his body felt. They weren't alone. Something evil shared the night with them.

Jack pulled Sam to a stop and keyed his microphone. Blake, only one step ahead of them, felt their absence and turned. Find cover, Jack mouthed. Blake nodded and ran the last few steps toward the back door, using the aging oak tree that canopied the small porch as protection. Jack pushed Sam from behind, silently ordering him to follow Blake. "We aren't alone," Jack announced over the microphone. "Something evil and tainted is out here with us." He didn't care what anyone

thought of his announcement, he didn't want anyone caught unawares.

"There's nothing on the GPS unit."

"I know what I feel. They must have untagged men out here with us. Everyone, keep alert."

Jack felt the enemy's glee before he caught the flash of silver hitting the moonlight. "Sam, cover." Jack shoved their leader toward the tree and turned to meet the knife-wielding mercenary who'd managed to get within feet of them. Whoever this guy was, he was good. Jack hadn't even picked up the man's scent, just his unfettered joy in killing those weaker than himself or those he felt needed to be cleansed because of their differences.

Lost in thought, Jack barely ducked out of the way of the knife in time. The speed with which the enemy attacked was almost otherworldly. This was no ordinary human. It was something more, something dark and deadly, but definitely not a normal human. He could feel his hold on the men inside slipping. That he couldn't allow. He needed to take care of this abomination in front of him quickly.

Jack reinforced his link with the men inside, then went on the offensive. He watched as the man came in for another attack. He kicked the knife out of the mercenary's hand and immediately lunged for his knees, intent on taking him down. As though he could read Jack's mind, the mercenary twisted just as Jack launched himself. He lay sprawled on his stomach at the creature's feet and knew that at any second the knife would find its home in his back.

The creature stood over Jack's prone body, his foot planted firmly between Jack's shoulders. There was so much pressure on his back, it felt as though ten Were's were holding him down, rather than only one man. What was this thing? How in the hell were they to fight something that could become one with the darkness, that left no scent markers, and had the strength of ten of their strongest men?

Jack felt the creature jerk before he heard the soft report of the silenced sniper rifle. The pressure on his back remained. Three more shots were fired in rapid succession and still the creature did not fall, his strength did not waver. What in the hell would it take to kill this thing?

"One more second, Jack," he heard through his headset.

Jack swallowed, hoping he had that much time left. Air rasped in his throat, scarce in his lungs, the hold he had on the men inside almost nonexistent. Even now, he knew they staggered to their feet. He felt the creature jerk as a final shot, this one at close range, took him down. Jack sucked in a gasping breath. "Oh hell, we are in

some serious trouble."

"Are you okay, Jack?"

Jack rolled to his back and glanced over at the fallen man, thing, creature... whatever the hell it was. "Thanks, Sam."

"No problem, though I have to admit for a second I didn't think anything was going to kill him."

Jack shuddered, then sat up. "You and me both."

Blake walked over to the man and kicked him as though trying to ensure the thing had really died. "He took four shots to the chest and didn't even flinch."

Jack shook his head, "Whatever that thing is, it isn't human. Or at least not completely. He's as dark and twisted inside as a vampire, but as invisible as a ghost." He let the implications of his statement sink in.

"Shit."

"My sentiments exactly. I suggest we get in there, retrieve the woman and the package, and get the hell out."

His eyes focused on the prone Super Soldier. Sam nodded and held out his hand to Jack. "I couldn't agree more."

With Sam's assistance, Jack pulled himself to his feet and dusted off his pants. He once again immersed himself in the minds of the men inside. He couldn't take a chance that anything else would go wrong. Too much was at stake.

\* \* \* \*

"We're in."

Sebastian stepped back, releasing Catalina from his arms. No matter how much he'd rather be holding her, he knew now wasn't the time. "Victim's status?" Sebastian asked, knowing Catalina needed the information as much as she needed her next breath. Her eyes focused on his as she awaited the answer.

"Badly beaten. She's in shock. I recommend sending Cat in. Looks like she could use a friendly face, someone familiar."

"Thanks, Jack. We'll be right in."

"Keep your eyes open. If there are any more soldiers like the one I ran into you won't know it until it's already too late."

"Understood." Sebastian watched Catalina's struggle. He could feel her turmoil. Her next words didn't surprise him, as he had the same thoughts running through his mind. "He didn't mention whether they raped her or not." "Don't imagine the worst. Wait until you see her for yourself."

A flash of something, hurt maybe, appeared in her eyes and then it was gone. A second later, she seemed to gather herself and nodded. "Let's go," she whispered.

Taking her hand, he opened the van's rear doors and hopped out. Catalina jumped out beside him and the pair dashed across the road and into the shadows. They silently made their way around the house until they reached the rear door. He barely glanced at the dead soldier, intent only on getting Catalina inside to safety.

Sebastian watched the bullet that ripped through the soldier's skull slowly push out of his skin, saw him gasp as he sucked in a breath of air. Before he could comprehend what he was seeing, a bullet ripped through his chest. He looked up into Catalina's eyes, saw her horror. He staggered, dropped to the ground as his blood poured out of his body. He had only enough energy to do one thing. He keyed his microphone. He hoped they'd understand his message before it was too late. "Cat...danger...not dead..." Then everything went black. His last thought before the darkness overtook him was to wonder what their children might have looked like had he survived.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Catalina stared at the creature as it took a step closer to her, then another and another, until he stood but a hairsbreadth away. She was paralyzed, unable to move, to function, but inside she screamed for her mate. He couldn't be dead. She wouldn't allow him to be dead.

On automatic pilot, she reached for her microphone switch and did the only thing she could. She screamed. She forced all the pain, the terror in her to escape. She screamed as though her life depended on it, and knew that, without a doubt, it did. Whatever this thing standing in front of her was, it was no longer human.

She watched the soldier lift his arm, saw the gun in his hand point at her head. She knew then that for whatever reason, her capture was no longer the goal. They wanted her dead instead. Everything around her seemed to slow, as though Father Time understood that even a few seconds delay might save her life. She watched as the

creature's finger grew tighter on the trigger. Then the world spun as she dropped to the ground. Before she had time to figure out what had happened, two shots echoed through the night and the creature dropped to his knees before falling to the ground.

Catalina took that moment to look down, to see what had wrapped around her legs. "Oh my God, Sebastian!" Catalina had to touch him, to see if he really lived. She thought she'd lost him. That she'd never be whole again. She ran her hands through his hair, over his face. His eyelids fluttered as he struggled to remain conscious. "I thought you were dead and I about died inside." She didn't care that tears were streaming down her face. She didn't care what the others thought.

"Couldn't...let...die."

"Sshh, don't try to talk, honey. Just lay there until we can get you some help." She looked up to see Mark and Tim standing over her protectively. Rafe must be close by, still standing guard as these were his men who'd come to her rescue. "Thank you for saving us."

Mark looked down at the soldier, then his gaze met hers. "I don't know that I have. He shouldn't have risen again. How the hell is this happening?"

Catalina wished she had the answer to his question. An enemy that couldn't die by bullets was an enemy they had no idea how to fight.

"How do we make sure he stays dead this time?"

They hadn't known that Jack had arrived until he spoke. "You take its head from its shoulders."

"Sebastian needs help. He's been shot."

Jack was already probing the wound as he spoke. "We need to get him inside." He stood and motioned for Rafe's team to pick Sebastian up.

She swallowed and then licked her lips. "What about that?" she asked, pointing at the seemingly dead abomination.

Jack didn't answer, instead keyed his microphone. "We have a situation, Sam. I need you and Blake."

Seconds later both men appeared, their faces turning ashen when they spotted the blood covering Sebastian.

"What the hell happened?" shouted Sam. "Never mind that, get him the hell inside first."

Mark and Tim rushed to do his bidding. Catalina kept her hand in Sebastian's as the pair carried him to the house. Sam grabbed her arm, forcing her to drop Sebastian's hand. "I need to be with him."

"I need to know what happened here, Catalina. Only you have the answer to that."

"I'll tell you what the hell happened. That creature heals just like a damn vampire. It moves with no noise and a bullet to the brain won't kill it. If he weren't obviously human, I'd say he was a new breed of vampire. What in the hell have they unleashed upon us, Sam? A Daystalker—half-human, half vampire? And who in the hell are we fighting against?"

"I don't know, Cat. I wish like hell I did." Sam glanced over at the unmoving Daystalker. He needed to dispose of the body before it reanimated again. "Go on inside with Sebastian and your friend. They both need you right now. Blake and I will take care of this. He won't harm anyone again."

Catalina looked at her adoptive brother and knew the creature would be taken care of. With that thought firmly in her mind, she retreated to the house, anxious to be with Sebastian and Sharon. Sam was right, they needed her right now.

\* \* \* \*

Sam watched Catalina rush into the house, then turned to Blake. "Let's get this business taken care of. I don't like knowing we're this vulnerable. And I really don't like knowing this guy can just get up again."

"I'd have to agree with you, but how in the hell are we going to chop off his head. We're not exactly prepared for something like this."

"You know, Blake. If this thing heals like a vampire, we may be able to terminate it the same

way. Pierce its heart, then burn it to ashes."

Blake nodded. "At least that we're prepared for."

"Well, let's get this done." Sam reached for the sheath attached to his thigh and pulled out his hunting knife. In minutes, they'd removed the creature's heart, doused it with gasoline, and set him aflame. Turning to Blake, he said, "Let's get out of here. I don't like the feel of this."

As one, the pair turned and entered the house. It was time to gather up the injured and find some place of safety until they could analyze this new threat.

\* \* \* \*

Catalina wanted to scream. How could so many things be going wrong? What would she do if she lost her mate? How would she survive? He was in such terrible shape. The bullet had done a tremendous amount of damage. They needed to get him to the plane where Keenan and Cerri could do their magic healing on him.

Guilt was eating her alive. Sharon wouldn't be injured if it weren't for her. She'd led these men to her. Ultimately the events that had led to Sharon's torture were her fault as well.

Bruises covered Sharon's body. Both her eyes were blackened and swollen shut. She looked like

they'd used her for a punching bag. That didn't even account for the cigarette burns that littered her skin. She needed healing desperately, but so did Sebastian. After receiving such harsh treatment from the men who tortured her, Sharon would no doubt want Cat to sit with her with so many big males surrounding her, but she didn't dare leave Sebastian's side. None of this was fair or right.

Blood continued to pour from the wound in her mate's back. Until they removed the bullet, they couldn't transport him to safety. They'd taken a huge risk just bringing him in from outside. Thank God Sebastian had lost consciousness right after they'd carried him into the house. Otherwise she wouldn't have been able to handle the suffering she'd seen etched across his features. Not that Sebastian would utter a word about the pain. It would be just like him to remain silent believing she wouldn't know how hurt he was. But they were a mated pair and she could feel his pain as if it were her own despite his unconscious state.

She watched as Jack probed the wound one more time with a pair of forceps in search of the bullet lodged inside. The deadly silence all around her was getting to her. Everyone was afraid to ask the question uppermost in their minds. She had to know and so did everyone else. "Jack is everything all right? He's not going to be

paralyzed, is he?"

"No, it just missed his spinal column. But he'll be out of action for a few days at least." With one last wrench of the forceps, Jack retrieved the misshapen bullet from Sebastian's back. "There. Now we need to get him aboard the plane to finish patching him up. He will need a transfusion as soon as possible." It didn't need to be said that Cerri would finish healing him, but with Sharon in the room, they needed to be circumspect about what was said in front of her.

"That's good, because we need to get this show on the road."

Cat swung around at the sound of Sam's voice. She hadn't heard him come in, though she could now smell the odor of gasoline that clung to his clothing.

Jack nodded, then said, "Give me a few minutes to stitch this wound closed. Cat, you might want to find that package your sister sent here. I wouldn't want this to all be for nothing."

Cat glanced over at the three unconscious men leaning against the wall then looked to Sam. "What do we do about them?"

"We leave them here. I have a feeling that whomever we're dealing with doesn't accept failure. They won't live out the rest of the night. Jack's right. We need that information your sister thought to send here." Sharon spoke for the first time. "It's underneath the floorboards in the pantry. I'd help you find it, but..."

"Thanks, Sharon, but you've done more than enough. We're going to get you out of here and to a safe place soon. No one will ever hurt you again," Cat vowed. She turned on her heel and made her way to the kitchen, fully aware of Blake trailing her. She looked back at him questioningly.

He just shrugged and said, "No one goes anywhere alone until this new threat has been neutralized."

Since she was in complete agreement, she continued into the pantry and looked at the floor, searching for any sign of a hidden section that pulled up. She found nothing. She turned to Blake, confused. "What did she do, nail it down so it looked like all the rest maybe?"

Blake, looking equally confused, continued to stare at the hardwood floorboards. Every board had freshly minted nails driven through them. "I guess she nailed them all down so nothing would stick out as an obvious sign."

"Well, she has to have a hammer somewhere around here. We need to pry up all these boards until we find the package."

After locating the hammer in a kitchen drawer, Cat stood guard over Blake as he went to work destroying the pantry floor. Thirty minutes later, and nearly all the floorboards removed, they found the brown paper-wrapped package shoved in the far corner of the massive butler's pantry.

"I know what you're thinking, Cat, but we don't have time to go through that package now. We need to get out of here."

"You're right, but it's damn tempting. But my curiosity isn't worth endangering Sebastian or Sharon any further."

\* \* \* \*

The watcher, hidden in the woods, looked on as the group of Weres and the human woman made their way out of the house and to their vehicles. The test had been a success even with having to sacrifice one of their hybrids. They now had enough empirical data to prove that they were effective weapons against the Weres. Unfortunately, the Weres had also discovered its few vulnerabilities. Overall, his report would be positive.

Now, he had to take care of the ones that had failed to find the package. He would see to their deaths personally before reporting in.

\* \* \* \*

The ride to the waiting plane was fraught with

urgency. Both Sebastian and Sharon were in shock and needed immediate treatment. And Jack appeared just as anxious for her to open the package as she, if the looks he sent her were any indication.

By the time everyone had boarded, the tension emanating from the group was palpable. Keenan was the first to greet them at the hatch and quickly assessed the situation. Within seconds, he had directed the placement of Sharon and Sebastian in the rear cabin. "We've set everything up in here just in case we need an emergency medical clinic."

Gripping Sebastian's hand in one hand and the envelope in the other, Cat followed the men into the rear cabin. Keenan was right. It did look like a tiny medical clinic. Covering the dressers was surgical instruments, the couch, as well as the bed, had a clean sheet and pillow awaiting the patients, and extra lighting had been set up.

Cat glanced behind her and motioned for Sam to take the package. Her place was beside her mate. Sam could look through the contents to find out exactly why Samantha was still on the run and hunt for clues as to where she might be.

\* \* \* \*

As Keenan and Cerri used their magic to heal Sebastian's wounds, Jack patiently went over Sharon's body, noting her injuries. Some of the burns were nasty and could become infected. When the Were-bears were finished with Sebastian, he'd have them heal her injuries as well.

He hoped like hell there was something worth all this in that package Samantha had sent. He hated seeing anyone tortured, never mind a complete innocent like Cat's friend.

His mind drifted elsewhere, occupied with thoughts of Samantha and her child. Could he truly accept another man's child as his own? After careful deliberation, he figured he could love any child of hers. He was so close to meeting her he could practically taste it.

He was more worried that she wouldn't be able to handle being with a man, any man now. How could she function normally around one after what she'd been through? All he could do was be there for her. Be patient. Wait for her to get to know him. It helped that he had time on his side. With the imminent birth of the babe, they had plenty of time to learn about each other.

"Jack, if you're through in here you might want to take a look at what Samantha left for us."

"What do you mean? She left something for me personally or some medical data that we need?"

"A bit of both actually."

Now that was a surprise. He wasn't expecting her to leave something for him. Though he knew from Cat that she was clairvoyant, he should have expected it. After conferring with Keenan and Cerri, Jack made his way out of the cabin and headed toward the front of the plane where Sam and the others were waiting. What would she have to say to him? He was about to find out.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Jack didn't even bother to sit once he entered the forward compartment. He wouldn't have been able to stay still. He definitely wasn't ready to let Sam see how much the news that Samantha left him a personal message meant to him. "What have you got?"

Sam handed him two packets. "Here. See for yourself."

Jack grabbed the two packets and made his way over to one of the recliners. He needed the small space of time to get his heart rate back under control. Only one of the two packets was marked with his name and Jack decided to save the personal packet for last. Taking the already opened packet, Jack pulled out its contents.

It took only a few seconds to determine just what he held in his hands...the DNA codes of the Daystalkers, as well as the lab tests documenting their creation. How in the hell had she managed to retrieve this information? In his hand, he held

everything they needed to know about their newest enemy. Everything from the way they're created to the way they're destroyed. Everything, that is, except who created them, how many they creatures existed and where they could be found.

If these creatures hadn't been created to destroy shape shifters, he'd be amazed with the results the scientists had achieved. Almost. Creating a new species as the Daystalkers must have taken a scientific genius to accomplish. Too bad that the scientists who created the monsters had designed them to kill when they could have made them protectors of the innocent instead. So engrossed with the reports he was reading, Jack forgot he wasn't alone until Sam spoke.

"Will those help you find a way to defeat the creatures, these Daystalkers?"

Jack cocked his head, still looking at the report. "If they have any weaknesses biologically, I'll find them. You can count on that. I'll need time to study these lab reports, field studies and training regimen before I can give you a definitive method to defeat them that has little risk to Weres. I'd rather find a way to destroy them that won't involve us having to get too close to these things. Perhaps a chemical agent of some kind..." he wondered, talking more to himself than the others as he pondered the possibilities.

"You'll have as much time as I can give you.

I'm sure you want to be alone to read your personal message so I'll leave you to it. I'll go check on the injured."

"Thanks, Sam." Jack watched as he left the forward cabin and headed toward the rear of the plane. His hands shook as he crammed the reports back into their envelope, shifted the packet to the side and grabbed the other. What would she have to say to him? And how would it change the rest of his life? If she told him to stay away, could he do it? Somehow, he seriously doubted it. He'd give her time, but not space. He'd spent his entire life waiting for her. Taking a deep breath, Jack opened the envelope. He pulled out the single slip of folded paper.

Dearest Jack,

Let me start by saying, I've waited for you for many years. But things had to happen the way they have. I don't know everything that will unfold, but on occasion, I know when fate intends for things to go a certain way and when there is an opportunity to change things to affect their outcome.

I've done everything I can to help our people. I can no longer do it alone. I will need your help, Jack, if our people are to succeed in the war that will soon be upon us.

I've seen two possible futures. One where our people are in hiding, nearly decimated after being hunted to near extinction. In the second, my son, the product of

rape between a hybrid soldier and me, will lead us into a new age. In this vision, we are free to live amongst the humans with no fear of persecution.

First, however, he must be born. I fear that, with the path that I must follow, you will be too late to save him. I'm not going to leave you clues to point you in the right direction. For this to unfold the way it should, I cannot leave you clues.

I'm hoping to be back at my house in Spain by the time you receive this. I won't be alone for long. You should have enough information now to teach the others how to battle these creatures on an equal footing. You need every advantage at your disposal. Our people need every advantage.

My son must be born and I'm counting on you to see that it happens. Bring only those you are sure you can trust. I don't know how the events are about to transpire. I sometimes cannot see the events that affect me directly or those I love. Believe me, even though we haven't met, I do love you with everything in my being. I know you better than I should – considering we have never met – and a better man doesn't exist on this earth. I can only pray that I've done enough to help you with your mission.

I'll be waiting on you, Jack. It's time for us to meet, to raise a family. It's time for me to stop running and come home.

All my love, Samantha Jack closed his eyes, and hung his head. She hadn't answered all his questions, but she'd answered enough of them. He had to talk to Sam. They didn't have much time and he had to make sure he picked the right people for the upcoming battle. Samantha was counting on him and he would not fail her.

\* \* \* \*

The first thing Sebastian felt was blinding pain, followed by blessed warmth. The last thing he remembered was dragging Catalina to the ground. He could feel her close by. Her concern and fear poured through their mate bond. Lying flat on his belly, he felt warm hands pressing against his back. He'd heard rumors about Cerri's healing abilities, but had never experienced it firsthand. He was a believer now because, as he continued to lay face down on this flat surface, he felt the peculiar sensation of his skin knitting back together. He licked his lips and then cleared his throat. "Cat?"

In moments, she stood by his side. "Thank God. I didn't think you were ever going to regain consciousness. You worried me sick."

God, he loved her throaty voice, and right now, it was music to his ears. He'd been so worried something would happen to her. Never again

would he allow her to be in danger. If he hadn't yanked her down when he had, she'd be dead. She wouldn't have been able to dodge the bullet the creature had aimed at her head. He started to grab for her hand, only to gasp in pain when the slight movement wrenched his back. Maybe he shouldn't move just yet.

Cerri pressed her hands more firmly against his back. "Don't move, Sebastian. We're almost done, but you've lost a lot of blood and will need a transfusion as soon as we're finished here."

"Do what she says, Bastian. I don't want to have to see you bleeding again. It's not one of my best memories," Cat pleaded.

"Just like I don't want to be in the position we were in this evening ever again." As soon as Cerri's hands lifted from his back, he forced himself to sit up. He wanted to groan in pain, but he had to make sure Cat understood exactly where he was coming from. He watched her head snap up.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, never again will you put yourself in danger. I'm sorry, Cat, but until this new threat has passed, you're going to have to sit on the sidelines for this search for your sister." Sebastian waited for the expected blowup.

"I see." Catalina turned her back on him and simply walked away.

That left him guessing as to what to say to her. He felt her immediate withdrawal from their bond. It was as though she had shut herself off from him, from her feelings for him. This couldn't be a good thing. He made a move to follow, but was quickly overcome with dizziness. When Cat didn't return after a few minutes, he knew they were going to have a fight. Just as he wouldn't allow her to put herself in danger, he couldn't allow this wall to stand between them. He turned to tell Cerri he was ready for the transfusion, and looked into the questioning gaze of Sam, Cerri, Keenan and Rafe. "What?"

After several seconds, Sam answered for the group. "That has to be the stupidest thing I have ever witnessed. You don't tell your mate that she has to sit and twiddle her thumbs when the one who is injured is yourself. What do you think she went through seeing you shot? This is her sister and you got hurt because of her. She already feels guilty that her hunt for Samantha has gotten you hurt. Now you tell her she can't look for her sister at all. How do you think that makes her feel?" With that said, Sam turned on his heel and stomped away.

Sebastian stretched his back and rolled his shoulders, then met Cerri's gaze. "I imagine you have something to say about this."

"No, not really. He pretty much said what I was

thinking." She turned her back on him and walked away.

"If it makes you feel any better, I agree with the fact that she should stay out of danger. She's carrying your child. She doesn't need to be in the middle of a battle," Keenan calmly told him before he followed Sam's retreating back.

Sebastian watched Keenan walk away, too stunned to move. *Pregnant. Catalina is pregnant. With my child.* He didn't know whether to be scared to death or giddy with joy. How could he have not realized she was pregnant? He could only console himself with the knowledge that only Keenan seemed to know about her pregnancy. If none of the other Weres had known, then perhaps it was the Druid powers in Keenan that sensed the pregnancy.

He had to tell her. Maybe his comment had made her feel bad, but hopefully this news would perk her up, in addition to giving him a valid reason to keep her from danger. There had to be a way to let her help with the search or at least be there to comfort her sister and keep her safe at the same time. He just had to find it. He had only taken a single step toward the door of the cabin when Jack walked through.

"Sebastian, I need to speak with you."

"Can it wait, Jack? I need to catch up with Cat. There's something I need to say to her."

"Cat's who I want to talk to you about."
That surprised Sebastian. "What about her?"

"Samantha is about to go into labor. I know where she is, for the time being, and we need to gather our forces and go to her. According to Samantha, there will be a major battle and I'll need to be with her to help her through the delivery. I need someone I trust to lead the charge. I need you, Sebastian. And Samantha is going to need all of her family around her if she and her son are going to survive this."

"If we keep enough guards on you and Cat, then I don't see a problem with that. Keenan just told me that she's pregnant and this will both allow her to be with her sister when she needs her most, but also keep her out of the thick of battle."

"Then that's what we'll do. We already have a good team here on the plane, but I don't think it will be enough. I could literally feel Samantha's fear and worry through her note as though she'd left a part of herself within it. I can't fail her, Sebastian." With clenched fists and gritted teeth, Jack vowed, "I won't fail her!"

"Then we won't fail. I know several more Weres we can recruit that I'd trust with my life."

"Good. I trust you to lead this battle because I'm sure Sam will insist that he protect Samantha and Catalina."

"So long as he isn't the only one."

Jack nodded and turned to leave the room.

Sebastian was right on his heels. He found Catalina sitting in one of the seats, looking out the window. Her misery was written all over her face, though she still had a wall up between them. How was he supposed to tell her what he needed to with so many people looking on? He doubted that she'd talk to him willingly. All he could do was try.

Sebastian waited patiently for her to acknowledge him. He still felt weak and shaky and would do so until the transfusion, but there were things he had to tell her first. Then he'd take care of himself. He couldn't allow this silence between them to open a gap in their relationship that they might never bridge.

"Sit down before you fall down," she whispered. "You shouldn't be up and about yet."

Thank God, was all he could think. Much longer and he might be having this conversation while he lay flat on his back. "Can we talk, Cat?" When she seemed to hesitate, he rushed forward. "Look, I was an ass, baby. I just want you safe. Is that so wrong?"

"I know you do and I can understand that, Sebastian. But you came off as Mr. Dictator and I won't stand for it. I will go to my sister whether I have your approval or not. She needs me. I feel it in my gut, Sebastian."

He swallowed the automatic protest that rose. "You're right. I was a dictator and an ass, but I only had your well-being uppermost in my mind. Maybe there was some macho He-man attitude going on as well. But, Cat, you aren't the only one who will be affected if something should happen to you."

"You don't think that I feel the same worry when you fight the baddies, too? I go out of my mind with worry, but it's who you are. And I accept that."

"That isn't what I meant, Cat. I accept and cherish everything about you. Cat, Keenan just told me that you're pregnant. That's what I meant when I said that you wouldn't be the only one affected if you were hurt. So would our son or daughter."

Catalina turned questioning eyes on him. "Pregnant?"

He could feel her shock, her surprise and even feel her great determination, but she was still keeping her thoughts to herself. That's okay. At least she was talking to him. It was a step in the right direction. Now, if he could only convince her that she could be with her sister when she needed her, but stay out of the action.

"You don't need to convince me. I won't do anything to harm our child."

He supposed he shouldn't be surprised that

she'd read his thoughts. He wouldn't hide anything from her anyway. They were mates, meant to share every aspect of their lives.

"I'll sit this fight out. But you have to promise me something in return."

Sebastian didn't even have to think about it. "I'd do anything for you. You know that, don't you? I can't help being adamantly against you putting yourself in danger whether you're pregnant or not. To be honest, I'm damn glad you are pregnant at this point. I know that probably pisses you off, but I won't lie to you."

Catalina chuckled and then her voice grew solemn. "At least you're honest with me. Promise me you'll be careful, that you won't take any unnecessary chances."

"I can make that promise to you and mean it. I'm not going to let anyone or anything separate our family." He took a deep breath, letting it out on a sigh. "I want our child to know both of its parents."

She sighed and finally raised her eyes to .is, "I love you, Bastian. You get hurt and I'll kill you."

He couldn't help but smile at her ferociousness. "I could say the same thing." Sebastian reached for her hand and raised it to his lips. "You're my entire world, baby. When I thought that creature would kill you, I died inside. I won't have you feel the same. I'll be careful. For you, for our baby. For

us.

"You're not looking too good, Bastian. Maybe you should get that transfusion now."

He could hear the worry in her voice and it touched his heart. Even after treating her like a mindless doll, she easily put her hurt aside. It amazed him. And it humbled him. "I'll do that. Cerri headed in to work on Sharon as I left the cabin. I'm sure she could use a friend about now."

"You're right. I was so focused on you, I neglected her." Catalina stood and took his hand in hers. "Come on, I'll walk you there." They were almost to the rear cabin when a blood-curdling scream echoed through the plane.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

Every Were on board, with exception of Cerri who continued to sleep after exhausting herself healing Sharon, bounded from their seats, intent on running to the rescue. Sebastian and Catalina were the first ones to get to the cabin where nightmare images only she could see continued to torture Sharon. Still unconscious, she was more than likely reliving every awful moment.

Jack pushed his way through the crowd and sat next to his patient. Very gently, he laid his palm along her brow and she began to calm. It must be nice at times to have that particular psychic ability, Catalina mused. What she wouldn't give to be able to do that for her friend. To comfort with just a touch. It must be an excellent talent to have for a doctor.

Catalina looked on as Sharon slowly awakened. Her eyes fluttered and she gasped as full awareness seeped into her consciousness. When she groaned, Catalina couldn't stay back any longer. She rushed forward to try to do her best to comfort her friend. As soon as Sharon saw her, she burst into tears. All Catalina could do was to wrap her arms around her friend and offer her the warmth of companionship. She hoped it would be enough.

"Why, Catalina, why did this happen?"

"I don't know, Sharon. All I know is that you had something that someone wanted back badly. At least, that's our assumption as to why you were attacked." Guilt consumed Catalina. She should have explained the danger, rather than keeping the details vague when she warned her. Sharon had done nothing to deserve the torture she received. Besides, if anyone deserved to know about the preternatural creatures, Sharon did. She'd earned it with her silence, even through torture.

"Did you find the package?"

"Yes. It took tearing up the entire pantry floor, but we found it. That was a pretty clever hiding place."

Sharon shivered so Catalina stroked her arms, her hair, wherever she could reach, doing her best to be there for her.

"What's in it?"

"Actually, I don't know. Both you and Sebastian received injuries so I spent all my time with the two of you. I haven't had time to ask." Catalina took a deep breath. She had to tell her friend the truth about her people. She had most definitely earned it. Even without knowing what her people were, she'd protected them, had been loyal to them. Cat glanced over at Sam, the question blazing in her eyes. At his nod, Catalina looked at Sharon and said, "I have a story to tell you."

\* \* \* \*

While Catalina spoke with her friend, Sebastian figured he'd better take the opportunity to speak with Sam, Jack, Keenan and Rafe about setting up their battle plan. He needed to ensure they had the very best of their fighters and the proper weaponry to kill the Daystalkers. For that, he needed to get with Jack and hope that whatever Samantha had written had something to do with destroying this latest threat to their people.

With that in mind, Sebastian signaled to the four men and motioned them out of the room. Once back in the center of the plane, they all sat to discuss the upcoming confrontation.

Sebastian looked at the four men gathered around him and cleared his throat. It felt odd to be the one in charge with Sam and the others around him. Keenan was the leader of the Were-bears and

formidable in his own right, never mind being a druid and having magic in his fingertips. Rafe was the leader of the Were-cats and as crafty as they came. Sam, the leader of the Were-wolves, could strategize with the best of them. And finally Jack, a doctor and a warrior, was a regular renaissance man and also the one man who may be able to tell him exactly what the Daystalkers vulnerabilities were.

Sebastian needed to know every vulnerability. Without that knowledge, they would be at a distinct disadvantage. With so much at stake, it was imperative that every detail went as planned. Nothing could go wrong. They must anticipate every eventuality and have a solution plotted out. They could not fail. "Jack, have you had a chance to look through the data Samantha gave you?"

"It'll take days to go through everything she amassed."

"At least tell me you've found something useful. We don't have days here. Those damn things have to have some kind of weakness."

"From my brief read through, it seems the Daystalkers have two shortcomings. First, they are just as susceptible to a staking as a true vampire. Secondly, removal of their head seems to be the only other option. Since they can walk during the day, even sunlight won't slow these suckers down. Beyond the beheading and the staking,

none of the tests the scientists performed on the Daystalkers, which they simply called hybrids, will slow them down for long. They just get right back up and do the job they were ordered to do.

"Freaking wonderful. Absolutely freaking wonderful," Keenan muttered.

"I couldn't have said it better myself," said Sam, leaning forward in his chair, his chin resting in his hands.

Rafe was the only one sitting casually in his seat, his feet crossed at the ankles, his hands laced behind his head. "Well, it seems to me, we treat this like any vampire attack. Our senses will fool us into believing they are human, yet there will be the tint of evil hanging in the air."

"Rafe is right," agreed Jack. "That's how I knew he was behind me. You have to be close to one of them. Or just plain shoot to kill anything that comes inside the perimeter."

Sebastian turned to Sam. "What would your strategy be?"

"I say we station Weres around the compound armed with both stakes and crossbows. The crossbows will nail anything within, let's say, fifty yards. For up close and personal, we go with teams of two. No one attacks a Daystalker alone. Use whatever you have on hand. Remember, everybody needs to burn. We need to guard the women at all costs. I've already agreed to stay behind and guard Cat and my sister. I think Keenan should also protect the house. His druidic skills could be quite useful in warding off an attack."

"Each of you, pull together a list of your most trusted members. Only those you'd have guarding your own back should be on this list. I want it within the next two hours. Then we need to pick everyone up and head to Spain," added Sebastian. Hopefully, he was doing everything he needed to. Cat's sister was depending on him.-They couldn't lose her or her child to the Daystalkers. "Now I need to get that blood transfusion as soon as possible. By the time I'm up and moving I expect all of the chosen team members to be notified and in place for pick up." Bastian met Jack's eye. "We don't have a moment to lose."

With that said, Sebastian staggered from the table and slowly made his way back to the rear of the plane for treatment.

Jack stood to follow Sebastian. "I better get that transfusion going or he won't be any good to us."

Keenan, Rafe and Sam continued to sit with their heads together, trying to come up with the best team possible. No one wanted the mission to fail, especially Sam.

He hadn't seen his sister in over twenty years. It was time for them to come together again. Past time in his opinion. He was a firm believer that destiny played out the way it was meant to, and interfering with destiny's plans could cause catastrophic consequences.

He sure wouldn't want to have his twin's psychic abilities, to have to make those decisions on what they could alter and what must happen. It would drive him crazy trying to save the world.

\* \* \* \*

Cerri had already laid out the equipment needed for the transfusion by the time Sebastian made it back to the rear cabin. Cat still sat near Sharon, holding on to her hand, their heads bent together. Sharon looked more fascinated now than terrified. A good sign that they still held her loyalty. Since Cat and Sharon were huddled together on the couch, Sebastian had no qualms about taking the bed for his procedure. Cat quickly ended her conversation with Sharon and made her way to her mate's side.

She gave him one of her sweet smiles. One that could steal his heart every time as her eyes sparkled and her face lit up with joy. She squeezed his hand in support.

It took barely an hour to complete the transfusion, an hour to formulate plans in his mind, an hour to enjoy the feel of Catalina's hands in his own, an hour imagining whether she was

carrying a little girl with silver blonde hair like her mom or a rugged little boy built like a football player like his dad.

By the time the transfusion was complete, the plane had taken off for the first of its many destinations in an effort to gather the perfect team. The plane would travel the globe to gather the proper armory and personnel. They would leave nothing to chance. All Sebastian could do was hope that they managed to arrive in Spain in time.

For over twenty-four hours, the plane landed, loaded up with weapons and personnel and refueled. By the time they finally reached Spain, Sebastian was going stir crazy. He needed to move, to do something, anything.

When they landed in Spain twelve groups of two Weres each, were armed and ready for battle, and no one would take this anything but seriously.

Each team was loaded down with crossbows and flamethrowers in addition to the everyday armament of knives and stakes. They took notice of all eventualities during the long flight. Now it was time to set up and let the fight come to them and make sure Samantha was where she said she'd be.

Rafe had contacted one of his associates to arrange transportation and meet them at the airport. From there, they would ride in a convoy until they reached Samantha's home.

After two hours of nerve-rending tension, they reached the Gasalla homestead. If he didn't know better, Sebastian would think that Jack would have preferred to land the jet in their front yard. It may be more expeditious but definitely a lot less stealthy.

They arrived at the hacienda and found silence. The stables were early quiet. The native birds absent. Nothing moved except the dust devils dancing across the land.

Leaving Catalina under guard, Sebastian, Sam and their teams swept the house. Sebastian looked each room over. It looked exactly as they'd left it two weeks ago except for the slight film of dust over every surface.

That left the underground cabin to search. Sebastian prayed he would find Samantha there and that their search would finally end. He needed precious time with Catalina and knew Jack was going to have his hands full with Samantha.

When they exited the house, two more teams followed them into the stables. They didn't leave one thing to chance. Even Melissa remained next to Catalina and there was no possible way she could be pregnant. Their women were to be protected at all costs. They still had no idea what had happened to the women and children that had disappeared earlier in the week. At least

Alyssa and Elizabeth had remained behind with their children, locked in the underground bunker on Sam's property in Upstate, New York guarded by Lobo as well as a large group of Were Protectors. Sebastian just wished that *his* pregnant mate could have—or would have—stayed behind as well.

As the group of men entered the stables, an earth-shattering cry of pain shattered the quiet surrounding them. Everyone went into action. The teams guarding the women took up defensive positions and the rest followed Sebastian and Sam into the stables. Within seconds, another scream echoed around them before falling abruptly silent.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

The watcher stood behind an invisible wall of magic and waited for the show to start. This was a battle preordained from the moment the creator had given birth to his creations. Even now, his former master roasted in hell for doubting the abilities of the creations, of the hybrids.

He watched as the men began rushing to the stables at Samantha's first scream as labor began to rip her apart. Ahh ... the battle had truly begun, while the enemy's forces were divided. He tapped his microphone to signal the beginning of the attack and sat back to watch the massacre. He was sure it would be only a matter of time before they had Samantha's baby and her if she survived. They could use that kid sister of hers in their experiments, too. The watcher rubbed his hands in glee. He would receive a reward for planning this attack. Finally, he would prove the creatures' worth.

\* \* \* \*

Jack's heart pounded in his chest. He should be the one rushing into danger. That was Samantha screaming bloody murder. He knew it. He felt it, felt her pain seep into his pores to become his own.

Within a few minutes, the troops were back, ready to escort Jack and the women to Samantha. Sam was nowhere in sight, obviously enjoying his own personal reunion with his sister.

Now Jack wanted his own personal time with her and he was about to get it. He held his weapon in one hand and his medical bag in the other as he traveled with his guards.

They'd barely entered the secret tunnel that was no longer a secret, when the gunfire started. Soon the crossbows and flamethrowers would come into account. As long as they aimed for the Daystalkers' hearts and burned them to ash afterward, they couldn't regenerate.

When Jack walked into the underground chamber, he was pleasantly surprised to see a fully furnished apartment. Samantha had even gone so far as to prepare for the baby with a layette and bassinette.

He finally spotted his mate and his heart stopped. Hair so brown it was nearly black hung down to her expanded waist. Eyes so deep blue he could drown in them met his own. She was stunning. Tall, like her brother, but the perfect size for his own six-foot two frame.

Whereas Jack looked like a rocker with his ripped jeans, combat boots and long hair, she looked like a Madonna in her flowing cotton ankle-length dress and glowing face. *The mother of my child.* Or who would be shortly if her panicky, pain-filled look were any indication.

She momentary let go of Sam and offered her outstretched arm to him. Jack felt his knees grow weak. With that single gesture, she was inviting him into her family. Jackson Daniels had finally come home.

He quickly moved to her side, practically shoving Sam out of his way to get to his laboring mate. "How far are the contractions apart, sweetie?" Jack asked.

Samantha smirked. "Not far enough. About ten minutes."

"That's good then. It means we have time. Now let's get you prepped. Do you have a gown you want to change into, even an old baggy t-shirt? Something comfortable that you won't mind if it gets ruined?"

"Sure," she groaned. "But can we do this quickly? Drug me to keep the hybrids from hearing me scream. They don't need the incentive to come after me."

Growing impatient, Catalina shoved Jack's back. "Let me say hi to my big sis, you hairy lug."

It looked to Jack as though Catalina would squeeze the baby out if she held Samantha any harder. "Ease up, Cat. Your sister is fine and we need to get things done in a hurry."

"Fine, you guys guard the entrance. I'll help her change and get her into bed."

Samantha, grimacing in pain, simply said, "Fine," and started unbuttoning her sundress. The men immediately turned their backs.

She wasn't more than halfway through when another contraction hit her. Jack stood before her within seconds ready to help. He had her off her feet and in his arms as he strode to the bed before anyone could as much as blink. Before anyone could help her change into a gown, he'd removed his own shirt and placed it over her, covering all the necessary parts from prying eyes.

Jack was definitely feeling very proprietary toward her. He didn't want anyone's hands on her but his own. He wanted to bring their child into this world without the extra company so it would be more intimate, bring them closer together. As the minutes ticked down inside the chamber, outside the action was growing louder. Jack could only pray that their small, experienced army could hold the Daystalkers back long enough for him to bring his son into the world.

It soon became obvious that Samantha would need an epidural to control her cries during the delivery. Unfortunately, he was ill prepared for that one thing. He wasn't an anesthesiologist. He could knock someone out, but to precisely control the medication wasn't his specialty and he couldn't take the chance of paralyzing her or worse.

An hour into the delivery, Jack realized one crucial fact. The boy was presenting breech. She needed a C-section. With fighting all around him, it wasn't ideal conditions to be doing such a procedure, especially when an attack was imminent. "Cerri, Keenan, I need you over here now."

Samantha cried out, "What is it Jack? What's wrong?"

"The baby is breech, sweetie. We need to take him surgically. Cerri and Keenan will help heal you after I stitch you up. You'll be as good as new."

"I don't understand."

"I need to do a C-section, Samantha."

Catalina's gaze flew to his. She knew the danger. Any number of things could go wrong.

"Cerri and Keenan are here to heal you, to make you strong enough to run if we have to."

Samantha looked into his eyes for a moment as though coming to a judgment, then nodded her head in agreement.

"I'm going to put you to sleep rather than numb you from the waist down. It's faster and less tricky. The whole procedure shouldn't take more than thirty minutes from the time you close your eyes until you open them again holding our little boy."

Another contraction seized her as she was about to agree. "Good God Almighty, just make the pain go away. Crap," she screamed into the side of her pillow.

"Give me a minute to set up the IV and we'll be good to go."

\* \* \* \*

The Daystalkers grew bolder, moving in closer and closer. Their snipers weren't having any more luck than the Were's. It was like a game of chess. Move one piece forward to see what your opponent will do. Sebastian was tired of being the pawn.

With his team behind him, he walked to the center of the yard in front of the stables in a comeand-get-me stance. The rest of the teams were well hidden. Some were in the house, some in the stables, even more in the woods beyond. The enemy was virtually surrounded. Catalina would probably kill him if she knew what he was doing.

But thank God she didn't.

He needed to draw these creatures out, to make them come to him. The only way to ensure victory was if Sebastian's people maintained their fortified positions. It was well past dusk now, growing into deep night. The Daystalkers would make their move soon. The creatures wouldn't be able to help themselves.

Sebastian's every instinct was to fight them as Weres, to let his wolf take the lead. Let the Daystalkers fight them. Let them see the might of the Weres they were ordered to destroy. But that would be foolhardy, and one thing Sebastian was not, was a fool. He had a mate and child inside who needed his protection.

The first gunshots pierced the ground at Sebastian's feet. The challenge had been accepted. Sebastian lifted the scope of the sniper rifle to his eye. He looked through the night vision scope and pinpointed his target.

With one shot, he took down the Were that had attacked Catalina in Switzerland. He wished he felt more satisfied. Killing at a distance just didn't have the same feel as doing it up close and personal. At least they could score one for the good guys, and more importantly, one for Catalina. Sebastian keyed his microphone, "Here they come."

\* \* \* \*

"Here he comes," yelled Jack, his forehead covered in sweat, his voice quivering with excitement. He handed the baby over to Cerri, to clean and assess. He turned back to finish taking care of the afterbirth and to begin sewing Samantha up. She should be coming out of her unconscious state rather quickly. By the time they'd cleaned the baby up, she was coming to. He had just set the last stitch and picked up the boy when Samantha became fully aware.

"Baby?" she mumbled. "Baby?"

Catalina looked on in awe. She'd never seen a baby so big before. He must weigh close to eleven pounds, she thought. No way could Samantha have survived that delivery on her own. Without Jack, she and her son certainly would have died during the birthing.

"Our baby boy is right here, sweetheart. Let Cerri and Keenan heal you and then you can hold him. He sure is acting hungry. Have you thought of a name?"

"Yes. It's Ian. Ian Jackson Daniels. If that's okay with you?"

Nothing Samantha could have said would have moved him to tears faster.

Catalina turned away, probably to give him and her sister a private moment. Sam took that time to walk away from his post to look at his nephew and sister. For him, today was a dream come true and everyone knew it.

"Of course, it's okay with me. Hold out your arms. Here's our son."

Jack watched as the baby rooted for a breast, searching for a source of milk. Extensive DNA tests would have to be completed on the child to find out exactly what he might need growing up, but he was in the position to do so. It helped that he had the material Samantha had liberated from the lab.

As he watched his son latch on to his mother's breast for his first meal, the unmistakable sound of pounding feet headed their way.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

The footsteps grew louder, moving closer to the entrance of the hidden chamber. Jack took back his son, while Sam gathered his sister in his arms. Keenan surrounded both Cat and Cerri with his brawn, all the while guarding the group with a magic shield. They all hurried to the farthest corner of the room.

The front door, solid and reinforced with steel, began to shimmy and shake beneath the onslaught. The sound was horrendous, like bodies were being thrown against it in hopes that one would break through. Jack couldn't help but wonder what happened to the men who were supposed to keep the Daystalkers away from Samantha while she delivered her son. They needed to retreat, but were hesitant about using the rear tunnels because they didn't know who held control of them.

The choice was taken out of their hands when Rafe, with his team members, silently slid through the back entrance. "We need to go out the back. We're being overrun.

"I'm not leaving without Sebastian." Cat planted her feet shoulder width apart. Her tone brooked no argument.

Rafe shook his head. "He figured you wouldn't be easily led." Before anyone could react, he lifted his crossbow and shot her in the chest. The shot narrowly missed her heart.

"Shit!" Sam lowered his sister to her feet then moved to stand in front of her.

Across the room, Melissa gasped, shock and dismay etched across her face.

Keenan, normally one to take the passive approach, raised both hands, whispered a silent chant. Rafe and his team were lifted into the air, their weapons ripped from their hands, leaving them suspended and unable to either attack or defend themselves.

"Jack, I need you to do that mind mumbojumbo thing you do. Since you can take control of their minds it might be possible to infiltrate their memory centers and find out what their plans are and who the hell they're reporting to."

"You got it, Sam."

As Sam stood guard over his sister and Jack delved into Rafe's mind, Melissa ran to Catalina. Jack swore as Catalina began to sway as blood continued to seep from around the arrow lodged

in her chest.

Sam's gaze shifted from Rafe to Cat. "Catalina, can you try to reach Sabastian? Find out what's going on with your mate and who's pounding on the door. Try not to let him know you're injured. The last thing we need is for him to come blazing in here like *Rambo*. He'll get himself killed."

Catalina dropped to her knees as weakness invaded her body. Melissa's arms wrapped around her, keeping her from falling flat on her face. Trembling in pain, and barely holding onto consciousness, Cat nodded. Sebastian, we're under siege. Rafe is the traitor.

Rafe, you're sure?

I'm positive. He came in sneaking through the rear entrance with another team. There are more trying to force their way into the cabin. Someone is sure as hell pounding their way through the door.

It must be another team working for Rafe, baby. No Daystalkers have gotten past me.

Catalina turned to Jack. "Ask Rafe who else he has working for them. There are at least two more teams beating down the door trying to get at Samantha and her baby."

Melissa cradled Catalina in her lap as Cerri approached. With one hand wrapped around the arrow and the other pressed against Catalina's torso, Cerri used her healing gift to send Cat to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Jack was amazed she'd lasted as long as she had. To remain alert enough despite the pain she must feel in order to speak to her mate proved just how strong Samantha's adopted sister was. Wasting no more time, Jack delved into Rafe's mind. What he found there surprised him. "This isn't Rafe. It's either an evil twin or a clone, and I don't know which situation would be worse for us. All I do know is that this isn't Rafe."

"How in the hell did he fool us all?" Keenan asked with a scowl.

Sam, ever the leader, said, "And for how long?"

"I hate to break it to you fellows, but you have four men suspended in midair ready to kill you and a pregnant woman possibly bleeding to death on the floor, and yet another woman who just suffered through surgery and childbirth. I say we need the cavalry to arrive," shouted Cerri, who for once lost her sense of calm.

"That's a very good point, Cerri. Where is the cavalry?" asked Sam.

On the other side of the front door, a whoosh sounded followed by the unmistakable stench of burnt flesh. "Obviously, help is on the other side of the door. How will we know if they are truly on our side or not?" asked Melissa.

Sam turned solemn eyes on Jack. "You'll have

to search the memories of everyone on every team. For now, until we know how deeply we've been infiltrated, you're the best we can do, Jack."

"If you were trying for a compliment, it fell a little short. Besides, I need time with my mate, Sam, and my new son."

"Sorry, Jack, that didn't come out quite the way I meant it." Sam sounded a bit sheepish. "And we'll make sure you get the time you need. It just won't be now."

"If I might make a suggestion?" offered Samantha. "If you find the real Rafe—who incidentally is tied up behind the stables right now—and have him pretend to be the clone, he could make it look like he's captured us. It will be fairly easy to figure out our enemies at that point—they'll be the ones pointing guns at us."

Keenan titled his head and looked at her with an interested gaze. "How do you know where Rafe is?"

Samantha shrugged. "The same way I know a lot of things I shouldn't. I'm clairvoyant."

Sam turned to his sister. "And you think that's all we need to do."

"For today it is."

"That's taking an awful big chance with their lives, don't you think?" Jack asked. No way did he want her in any more danger than she'd already been.

Sam continued to look into the seriousness of Samantha's gaze. "We're going to try it anyway. First thing we need to do is get Sebastian and his team in here." Sam turned to Jack. "If Keenan lowers them, can you keep them calm and docile?"

"Yeah, I can. But my energy is running low. These things are too powerful to maintain this level of control for long."

"We only need you to handle them for a few more minutes. Then they'll never bother anyone again."

It was time that Jack stepped in and did his job. It would be difficult enough while swimming in the depraved thoughts of their prisoners. "Cerri, I need you to continue controlling Cat's pain. I need to remove the arrow from Cat's chest so we can move her. Besides, she's incubating a little one in there. Her body doesn't need this kind of trauma."

"You got it, Jack."

With Jack on one side and Cerri on the other, they set to work removing the arrow. "The arrow is lodged between two of her ribs. I'm going to have to cut the arrowhead out. This is going to hurt her quite a bit. I'll do the best I can at keeping this quick and clean."

"I'm ready whenever you are."

"On the count of three. One...two...three..." He quickly cut the arrow out while Cerri held

pressure over the wound, attempting to heal it from the inside out before she lost too much more blood. It took a lot of energy to heal this way, but it was well worth it if it stabilized her enough to move her.

Cerri finally allowed Cat's mind to surface after making sure she got a nod of approval from Jack. "How are you doing?"

\* \* \* \*

"I feel like I've been shot."

"Well, your oddball sense of humor is back so you must be feeling okay."

Catalina struggled to sit up, fighting against the hands holding her down on the floor. "Sebastian. I need to tell Sebastian I'm okay. He's going on a rampage out there."

"He must have felt the crossbow hit you and your loss of consciousness," added Keenan.

Before Catalina could do anything telepathically to reassure Sebastian, a key turned in the lock of the front door and he came barreling through. The heavy odor of melted plastic and the stench of burnt flesh followed him into the room.

A pile of dead bodies smoldered in the tunnel. Sebastian's team spread out through the room, never taking their weapons off the fake Rafe and his team members.

Sebastian rushed to her side immediately, leaving the two teams with him to hold the enemy at bay. "Are you all right, baby?"

Catalina smiled even though she felt like crying. Sebastian cared so much for her. It showed in everything he said, everything he did. "I'm just fine," she lied.

"Might I suggest you go rescue the real Rafe and take out the trash," Samantha piped in, indicating the Rafe impostor and his men.

Sebastian's brows rose, his eyes mirroring his confusion. "Real Rafe?"

Pointing toward the center of the room where the man in question still hung suspended, Samantha explained, "He's a clone or something similar."

"Then most definitely we need to hunt for our Rafe," said Sebastian. "Let's go rescue the Cat King then." Within seconds, the unresisting enemies were shepherded out of the cabin. Before long, shots could be heard echoing through the escape tunnel and Catalina knew that the Rafe clone and his pals no longer lived.

After what felt like hours but could only have been mere minutes, Sebastian returned with the real Rafe and his teammate. The two men had been quickly subdued and placed out of sight for later interrogation and experimentation by the enemy. Sam, used to being in charge, took over the next stage of the rescue campaign. "Rafe, call together the members of the Daystalker team. Tell them you have the woman and the child and are coming out with them."

"We'll be close enough to take out the members once they join you. Samantha, you and Ian are going to be in the most danger. If anything goes wrong..."

\* \* \* \*

"No worries, Sam." She laid a comforting hand on her brother's arm. "Everything will go as it should." With head held high, Samantha strode through the exit tunnel the Rafe clone had recently used. In her arms, her son wiggled as he tried to press his face against her chest. Samantha smiled.

They exited the tunnel into the deepening dusk. Shadows were everywhere. The Daystalkers could open fire at any time. Only Samantha's presence and that of her son stalled their attack.

Rafe did his best to imitate the rigid walk the Daystalkers used. Everyone made sure to play their roles as discussed. Samantha and her son would make it out of this alive or every Were on the team would die trying.

"We've acquired the targets," Rafe said, speaking through the headset he'd stolen from his

lookalike.

Like sheep to the slaughter, the Daystalkers practically stood in line as apparently one of their own took down two of them with his crossbow before they could even blink. From fifty yards away, hidden behind some brush, Sebastian, Jack and Sam took down the rest.

\* \* \* \*

Hidden several hundred yards away, the watcher stood, his gaze transfixed through the binoculars he clutched in his white knuckled hands. It wasn't supposed to have gone down this way. He was afraid. Terrified. This news would greatly upset The Creator. With trembling fingers, he speed dialed The Creator. No one knew his name or what he looked like, only that the Hybrids were his pride and joy and that he had great plans for them. For them and the boy child. When the phone picked up, he only had one thing to say. "The mission failed."

"Then you are of no use to me."

The watcher gulped. Before he could beg for his life, he burst into flames, his entire body ignited. He screamed in agony, wondering why he'd turned traitor over twenty years ago, only to die now when all his dreams of having true power were so close.

When the Weres went to investigate the screams some minutes later, they found little more than a pile of ash and some teeth, which they quickly buried beneath the scorched earth.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

fter what seemed like forever, the women received the all clear for the entire hacienda. Everyone ignored the thick dust as they listened to Samantha's explanation of the last few months.

"Right before Cat left for Yellowstone, I started having visions. Visions of a little baby boy and I knew that somehow he would be mine. But I also knew he was different and I didn't understand how."

"Why didn't you tell me? You've always shared your visions with me."

"Because I knew, deep down, that whatever was about to happen, had to happen without interference. And let's face it, Cat, you've always been one to interfere."

"But-"

"Let her finish, baby," Sebastian said, taking the sting out of his words by lovingly running his hands through her hair.

"Just days before you left, I realized I had a tail.

Someone spent the bulk of their days watching and following me. I never saw him, but I could feel him sometimes."

At that bit of news, Jack began to stir, disturbing his son who he held in his arms. He tamped down his anger and gently patted the baby back to sleep.

"What I told you on the phone was essentially true. Someone tranquilized me while I was in wolf form, running with Lobo. The next thing I know, I'm handcuffed to a rusty iron bed in some shack in the middle of nowhere. They...they raped me that night, the other shifter clones. Somehow, I knew I was pregnant before they ever touched me that night. I can only assume that they'd artificially inseminated me as soon as they captured me, but wanted me to believe my pregnancy was the result of rape."

Shifting his son in his arms, Jack watched his mate as she continued to tell of her ordeal.

Sebastian didn't know how Jack could cope as well as he appeared because if it had been Cat that had been experimented on, raped and impregnated, he'd be unable to sit through the retelling of her suffering.

\* \* \* \*

"Thinking back, I realized it had been far too easy

to escape my prison and eventually went back to investigate. What I found was an underground lab similar to our underground home, but it was a huge complex. I raided as much information as I could, but the guards almost caught me several times while they patrolled the compound."

As Samantha watched Jack nuzzle her son, she smiled. At least something positive came out of her abduction-she now had a mate and son to call her own, not to mention being reunited with her brother. "I'm sorry now that I didn't have time to find the info on the clones or how they went about getting DNA samples. It would have been useful information. I knew from my visions that the information about the Hybrids was of utmost importance, even though at the time I wasn't sure what I was looking for. I only knew that I would know it when I saw it. I realized then that they had allowed me to escape to nurture the child they'd planted inside me. The first Hybrid Werewolf child. A true shape shifting assassin, if they had their way."

"Why did you lead everyone all over Europe?" Sam asked, his curiosity obviously piqued now that things were under control.

"I knew there were more things that had to happen first. I wasn't certain what exactly, just that all the events hadn't played out for our reunion yet." Sam nodded as though that were explanation enough, but the others could tell the pair was talking telepathically as siblings could.

"When I had a vision of Sharon being tortured for information, I almost didn't send it. But it couldn't be found on me. I'm so sorry she was hurt. How can I possibly make it up to her?"

\* \* \* \*

Jack finally spoke. "You'll gift her this house so she has a place that doesn't hold such terrible memories. You're coming to Canada with me."

"Actually, there is the estate on the outside of New Orleans." Sam offered. "I've had crews repairing and upgrading it for some months now. It's yours, Samantha. I deeded it over to you when I mated with Beth."

"We'll spend half the year in Canada and the other half in Louisiana, if that's all right with you, sweetie?" Jack proposed.

"That sounds perfect." She looked up at him with love already shining in her eyes. What kind of visions had she had of them together to put such a look there, he wondered.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian noticed the look that passed between the

pair and he desperately wanted to be alone with Catalina. They hadn't made love in ages and still couldn't because of her injury, but he needed to hold her close. To be by her side.

He needed to hold her and their baby close to his heart and know that she'd always be by his side. As though she felt his distress, she placed her hand in his and for now, that was enough.

With the Daystalkers and clones on the loose, they all knew that the future looked bleak and tough times were ahead. For right now though, right this minute, they would all celebrate life and love.

According to Samantha it would be many, many years before their people would be truly safe. Long enough for Ian to meet his destiny.

Thoughts of that were for later, though. Catalina needed her rest and it was his duty to see that she received it. After undressing her and tucking her into bed in her old room, he quietly left, positive she'd be asleep within minutes. He didn't trust himself to lie next to her without his wolf demanding he claim his mate again. Better to allow Cat to sleep and heal so that later, she'd be strong enough to withstand the fierce lovemaking his wolf desperately needed.

\* \* \* \*

Catalina knew that if she wanted to convince Sebastian to join her in bed, she'd have to use her female wiles to do so. Wearing nothing but a sheet, she was at least dressed properly for seduction.

Now all she needed to do was to give him no choice but to take her, to incite his lust to a fever pitch. She heard his footsteps approach and hopped out of bed, wrapping the sheet around her toga-style. She'd show him that rest wasn't what she needed, he was.

She planned to surprise him when he entered the room and nothing was going to stop her from having her way with him. She held her breathe as the door opened. Yet it wasn't Sebastian who stuck his head in.

Cerri stood there with a sheepish expression on her face, her hands hidden behind her back. "I thought you might be growing restless after being confined to bed for the last day and a half. I could feel the tension in the air. I rummaged through my bags and came up with something I think you might be able to use." Cerri held a powder blue, silk confection, as delicate as to be almost see through.

Catalina sighed with pleasure. It would definitely drive Sebastian wild. Now to set up the scene and wait for his arrival. "Do you think you can help me convert this room into a seductress' boudoir?"

Cerri smiled and the two went to work.

It seemed as if hours passed, but couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes, when the doorknob once again turned. The room glowed with a couple dozen candles. She'd exchanged the cotton bed sheets for silk ones. She'd even posed herself in front of the moonlit window in anticipation of his arrival.

Sebastian stopped just inside the door, his expression stunned. His eyes glowed with heat, with passion.

She had him just where she wanted him. Now all she had to do was keep him there. "Hello, Sebastian," she murmured, using her best Sophia Lauren imitation.

He stepped back, swallowed. "What's all this?"

"I want you. I need you, Sebastian. And I need you now." She let him see the need that blazed in her eyes as she took a step toward him.

"But your shoulder—"

"Is just fine. I, however, am not. Are you going to leave me to suffer or should I break out the toys and take care of the situation myself?"

Sebastian nostrils flared and he developed a tick near his right eye. He took a step toward her and then another until he was close enough to pull her into his arms. He lowered his head, stopped a hairsbreadth from her lips and whispered, "You sure you're up to this?"

"Oh, yeah. Just shut up and kiss me."

"As you wish," he murmured, then lowered his lips to hers. The kiss started out gently, a meeting of lips reacquainting themselves. Soon, slow became impossible. The very air around them seemed electrified. She longed for the protectiveness of his arms. Thought became action as he wrapped her in his embrace, pulling her against his body.

Carried away with her own response, she didn't notice Sebastian slowly lowering the straps of her teddy. He gave her body a raking gaze. She shivered in longing.

"Touch me, Sebastian. I want to feel your lips, your hands."

"Can't you feel me touching you?"

"Please, Sebastian. I need you. I need you inside me. Now!"

There was a tingling in the pit of her stomach. Her pulse skittered beneath his questing lips. Even his breath against her skin sent goose bumps down her arms.

Her heart jolted and her pulse pounded as his lips grazed lower, over the swell of her breasts. He swept the silky material away from her breast. There was nothing left to hold up the teddy and it fell to the floor in a silken puddle.

Catalina's head fell back as Sebastian eased her

nipple into his warm mouth. He raked his teeth over the swollen nub. She cried out in pleasure pain. "God, Sebastian!"

He chuckled, then continued to tease first one nipple then the other. His hands roamed down her back, caressing her skin, leaving chills in their wake. He grasped her ass, pulled her impossibly closer. She could feel his cock press tightly against her stomach.

He eased her back until she rested on his arms, then once again bent to her nipples, lavishing them with attention. "I can't take much more Sebastian. I need to touch you."

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. "Then what's stopping you?"

"Jesus, you're going to drive me nuts."

"Exactly." With lightning speed, he bent at the knees and swung her into his arms. His steady gaze bore into her with silent expectation.

"Take me to bed, Sebastian, and make love to me until we're both too weak to move," she pleaded.

### **Epilogue**

18 weeks later...

ou've got to push, baby. Rylee needs just a little more help coming into this world."

"Why don't you come over here and push?" Cat snarled.

Jack snickered before calmly telling her, "Sebastian's right, Cat. Only one more push and your daughter will be born."

"Oh, sure. Take his side. Men." She curled her lip. "You always stick together." But she did as asked and bared down one more time as the next contraction washed over her.

A frustrated scream rent the air and, with a sudden release, Rylee Marie Malone was born, already squalling for attention. From the end of the bed, Lobo gave the newborn a wolfy grin and patiently watched the babe. As though aware all eyes were on her, she quieted, looked at her parents, then the wolf and smiled. Right then, both her parents fell in love all over again.

#### About the Author

Bonnie Rose Leigh has been enthralled with the written word since childhood. When she ran out of things to read, she created her own stories. Now, she is a multi-published author and lives in a small town in Upstate, New York. She spends most of her time on the computer either writing or visiting with friends. When not busy on the computer, her free time is consumed with reading. It doesn't matter what genre the book is either, though she is partial to romance novels. Her favorite after-hours hobby is sprawling in a chair with a book clutched in her hands and a cup of cocoa sitting nearby.

Bonnie would love to hear from each and every one of you. Make sure you subscribe to her monthly newsletter or check out her blog as it will be updated regularly with release dates, excerpts and online appearances. And, as always, feel free to drop her email if you have any questions, concerns or just want to chat, and she'll get back to you as soon as she can.