

A man and a woman are shown in a close embrace on a beach. The man is shirtless, and the woman is wearing a black bikini bottom. In the background, a large polar bear is standing on its hind legs, looking towards the sky. The scene is set against a dark, cloudy sky and a beach with waves in the distance.

Bonnie  
Rose  
Leigh

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Protector's

JEWEL

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The Protector's Jewel  
Copyright © 2009 Bonnie Rose Leigh  
ISBN: 978-1-55487-219-0  
Cover art by Martine Jardin

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Published by eXtasy Books  
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# *The Protector's Jewel*

*By*

*Bonnie Rose Leigh*

## Dedication

*I want to dedicate this one to my loyal readers. This journey I'm taking would mean nothing without all of your unwavering support. Julie, you're a Godsend woman. Thanks for all your help in making this one better than it was to begin with. I also want to thank my editors, they, too, have helped me improve my craft and I can't thank them enough for that. Finally, to my own mate, Chris, thanks for supporting me in a million different ways every day. You're the best.*

## Prologue

Out of breath and virtually out of options, Anna bent down and gathered her ten-year-old daughter, Alyssa, into her arms. How could she tell her precious child goodbye? How could she not? There was no other way, not if Alyssa was to live through the night.

“When I say run, I want you to head into those trees over there, sweetie,” Anna murmured. She tried to keep the terror, the sorrow from her voice. For her daughter’s sake, she needed to remain strong, to stay in control, for just a few more minutes.

“But momma, I—”

“Promise me, Alyssa. No matter what you hear or see you’ll stay hidden in those trees until daybreak. Promise me.”

Alyssa began to argue, clinging to her mother’s arm, but Anna stopped her. “Please, do this for me, Alyssa.”

“Okay, momma.”

“And you remember who to contact if we get separated, right?”

“Yes, momma.”

“Good. I love you, Alyssa,” Anna whispered, clutching her daughter to her breast. She needed to show Alyssa how very much she was cherished, wanted to feel her girl in her arms one last time.

Time was running out. Her daughter had to get to safety. All that mattered was for her little girl to live. With tears trailing

down her cheeks, Anna kissed Alyssa one last time before gently shoving her toward the safety of the woods.

“Now, baby. Go! Run! Run into those trees and don’t look back.” Anna watched her little girl hurry into the woodland. Her only regret was that more than likely she wouldn’t live to see her daughter grow into womanhood. In fact, she didn’t expect to live through the night. She only hoped Alyssa would stay hidden until dawn, until it was safe.

Anna continued to stare into the woods long after Alyssa disappeared from view. She felt the evil one closing in, but couldn’t pull her gaze away from where she’d last seen Alyssa. Not yet. There were precious few moments left and she needed to use them wisely. After one last prayer for Alyssa’s safety, Anna focused all her attention within—on releasing her inner beast.

The change came quickly, as though her other self knew her time grew short. The world seemed to stop for just a moment, hanging suspended, as though Father Time himself was waiting to witness what was about to happen.

A wrenching in her spine caused the muscles to spasm. Then bones popped and snapped as Anna’s arms and legs shifted and changed, forcing her to drop down to all fours. Her mouth and nose changed into a lupine muzzle, hands and feet became paws, and a glossy black pelt covered her smooth skin.

Born of an ancient race, the *Loup-garou*, Anna was about to face her people’s most feared enemy, the Vampire. From the beginning of time, Vampires stalked and hunted the Were-wolf population for the strength of their blood. Many of the *Loup-garou* went into hiding, while others put themselves in harm’s way by becoming Protectors, defending others.

Swirling leaves and gusting winds heralded the Vampire’s imminent arrival. Anna heard the wind gather strength, seething, gusting through the trees. Branches groaned from the onslaught,

giving the night a bone-chilling portent of the evil to come.

Having a few special gifts of her own, Anna could feel the undead. She felt his elation that his prey was close, no farther than a mile away. He could feel them, sense their life's blood flowing strong and rich. Now she knew why she'd been so on edge. He had been pursuing them for days, enjoying the hunt, anticipating their capture. He could practically taste their fear, the adrenaline racing through their veins.

To a Vampire there was nothing in the entire world like the taste of fresh Were-wolf blood. The power it contained made the wait well worth it. She knew he was confident that he would feast long and well tonight.

Snapping twigs announced the evil one's arrival. There was just enough time to whisper a silent goodbye to her daughter before the battle commenced. If she could force the Vampire to the ground, she might injure it, force it to flee and then Alyssa would have a chance.

With all of her pent up fury and despair, Anna threw herself at the Vampire, attacking with every ounce of determination. Alyssa must live. The Vampire dodged the attack with lightning speed, whipping around to vise his claws around her neck.

"Where is she?" he asked, while slowly choking his prey, cutting off her air, which forced her to change back into her human form.

"Never," she spat at him. "I will never let you have my daughter. You'll kill me long before you find any trace of her," she gasped out her vow.

The enraged Vampire stared into her face, his eyes bulged and his hands shook.

Anna felt the Vampire's absolute fury just before he sank his teeth into her neck and began to drink ferociously, killing her with every swallow.

\* \* \* \*

Several hours after dawn, Alyssa, bedraggled, covered in dirt and torn clothing, found her mother's beaten and strangled body. Without a sound, the little girl knelt by her mother's side, hot tears leaving muddy trails down her filthy cheeks as she said a last goodbye. With the wisdom of someone much older than she, Alyssa dug her mother's grave, one handful of dirt at a time.



## Chapter One

*15 years later...*

On any normal day, the sound of shattering glass and footsteps pounding in hasty retreat would have been cause enough for Alyssa Maguire to lose her infamous Irish temper. Today, she considered it a godsend. Not even open yet for the day and already there were problems.

She'd do anything to get the obnoxiously long-winded president of the Shopkeeper's Association off the phone. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bevins. I really need to go. There's a problem out front." Carrying her portable phone, Alyssa rushed into the showroom to survey the damage and catch the punk's scent. Yep, just as she thought, it was the same man from last month's incident. Nothing was ever stolen. They just flung bricks through her windows with notes attached demanding she pay protection money.

On the other end of the phone, Mr. Bevins was still talking. "Are you sure you won't participate in this year's Sidewalk Celebration?"

She didn't have time for this. Alyssa sighed, being polite really sucked sometimes, but she was raised never to be rude. Well, unless she had no choice and Mr. Bevins had about reached her

limit. "I can't take the time out right now. Besides, I sell one-of-a-kind and very expensive, gemstone jewelry. It's not exactly something you can sell outdoors, you know. And my insurance agent just won't go for it without armed guards." After being stuck on the phone for going on fifteen minutes, Alyssa was having a hard time masking the irritation in her voice, especially considering the condition of her plate glass window.

"But, Ms. Maguire, we really need every shopkeeper along the boardwalk to participate."

"I just can't do that, Mr. Bevins. I can't take the chance of having someone pocket my merchandise. Now, I really need to go." If she had to listen to his nasal whine much longer, she might start screaming. She'd been trying to get him off the phone since the moment she found out who it was. She'd managed to duck his calls all week, to avoid this very conversation.

"At least agree to donate one of your pieces to the raffle."

"I'll think about it," she replied. She'd say just about anything if it would get him off the line. "Have a good day, Mr. Bevins." She quickly pressed the disconnect button before he could say anything more.

This was the third time in as many months someone had vandalized her shop. She groaned as she surveyed the broken glass littering her showroom floor. "Dammit! Dammit! Dammit! My insurance is going to go through the roof when the company gets this claim."

She didn't lose her temper often, but when she did, it wasn't pretty. Right now, she'd love nothing better than to catch the punk who'd thrown the brick through her storefront window. There was no doubt in her mind that she'd find his sorry hide. Tracking him would be child's play. His scent was everywhere, chewing tobacco, cheap wine and sweat. The only thing that kept her from going after him now, was a full day of appointments she

couldn't change.

But his scent was imprinted on her memory. His odor fouled the very air she breathed. She would know him in a crowded room, blindfolded.

"Well, there's no sense putting it off. I better go ahead and call Mrs. Beckett," she said, speaking out loud to bolster her courage. Hoping her policy wouldn't be canceled, she dialed the number, so not looking forward to this call.

\* \* \* \*

The moon lit the evening sky as Alyssa let herself into her apartment. After hunching over her workbench for the last eight hours, it felt good to kick off her shoes and sink into her overstuffed chaise lounge. It was a good thing she lived over her store because she was beat.

Her head pounded, her feet ached and her shoulders felt as though a bull had sat on them. She propped her head and feet on fluffy pillows she kept for days like today and heaved a heavy sigh of relief. She closed her eyes and wished she'd thought to grab a cold drink before sitting down. Then she'd be in heaven.

She hadn't eaten since grabbing a banana on her way out the door that morning and hadn't found a spare moment in her already busy day to stop for lunch or dinner. Having her storefront window replaced, meeting with two new clients and redesigning the Templeton wedding set at the last minute, kept her hopping the whole day.

At the rate her client base continued to grow, she would have to hire an assistant soon. At the very least, hire someone who could work the counter.

She'd opened her jewelry store just over a year ago, after scrimping and struggling for years to invest in the precious

metals and stones she needed to keep her business running.

Most of her stock, except for a few pieces she'd taken on consignment, was jewelry she'd designed and made over the years. With the one-of-a-kind designs her clients were demanding she create, plus working the jewelry store itself, she worked twelve to sixteen hour days, every day.

What she wouldn't give to have a national park behind her building. Instead, she was just a few feet from the ocean. It'd been ages since she'd had the time to let loose and run wild. Alyssa smirked, trying to imagine the beachgoers faces as a wolf raced along the white sand. She was almost tempted to do it, just for the hell of it. But no, she wouldn't dare bring notice to her kind by being so careless. She'd spent the last five years protecting her people. To endanger them by doing something so reckless, no matter how much fun it would be, would dishonor them. That's something she couldn't—wouldn't—do.

At that depressing thought, Alyssa pushed herself out of her chair and made her way to the kitchen where she heated up a can of chicken noodle soup. Man, what she wouldn't give to have a housekeeper who would have her meals waiting in the oven when she got home. "Yeah, sure, when I win the lottery." She wasn't poor, she was frugal and her profits went to helping her people.

She ran a stop on an underground railroad, but instead of helping slaves get to freedom, she helped her own people escape from their enemies. Her checkbook might be taking a beating, but helping her kind was worth the sacrifice.

If it hadn't been for the couple who ran the New Jersey safe house of the Underground Railroad when she'd been a child, she wouldn't be alive today. Even now, she remembered her harrowing journey to get to where she was today, a journey that ultimately led to her sense of responsibility toward her people.

She'd arrived at their safe house filthy, hungry and all alone. Grieving from her mother's death, armed with only a phone number, Alyssa had traveled over a thousand miles alone, going from safe house to safe house and hiding from an enemy she was too young to fight.

She arrived here at the Jersey Shore just over a week after her mother's demise. The elderly couple that opened the door took one look at her and decided the devastated little girl needed someone to love her. Alyssa wouldn't be traveling any further. She was raised as their daughter and lived as such until their deaths.

Looking back, Alyssa had no idea how she was able to escape the Vampire that killed first her father, then two weeks later her mother, or where she found the strength to go on alone.

Shaking off the morbid thoughts of the past, Alyssa rinsed her soup bowl and made her way to bed. She would be up soon enough and desperately needed a few solid hours of sleep.

Within moments of crawling into her bed, Alyssa was sound asleep. The only sound in the apartment was the ticking of her alarm clock as the minutes and hours crept by.

Alyssa dreamed of the past, of all she'd had, and all she'd lost. And finally, as night faded to dawn, she dreamed of a man. One who would not only stand by her, but would do his best to protect her. She didn't know who he was, where he was, only that somehow, this man, was a part of her. She could feel him just beyond her senses, like a humming in the back of her mind, and if she could only just reach out her hand, he'd be there to grasp it.

Alyssa woke to the buzzing of the alarm clock, her entire body singing with expectancy. She didn't know how, but in the deepest part of her soul, she knew that today was the day she would meet her mate. It didn't make sense to her, but who was

she to argue?

Her love life could only be classified as abysmal. Deep down she had always known she couldn't commit to just any man so she just never bothered to date like other people her age.

Even as a teenager, some part of her knew there would be only one man for her. There was no necking in the front seat of a car with a teenage boy, no experimenting.

During college, when her sorority sisters were participating in casual sex, Alyssa was hitting the books and dreaming about a man who would, one day, walk out of the darkness and sweep her away.

Alyssa wasn't sure whether she should be excited or terrified at meeting her mate. When would he show up? Would he be a customer shopping for a perfect gift for another woman? Would he be a supplier carrying the gems she had on order? Or would she just know him as he walked past her store window? In any case, she needed to get up and moving. Her destiny awaited.

\* \* \* \*

Blake Donovan wasn't sure what he expected to find once he reached his destination. It certainly wasn't this small and classy looking *Jewelry Boutique*. "I guess it's as good a front as any," he mumbled.

For all he knew, this would be another dead end. Then again, perhaps he'd finally be able to tell Samuel where his twin sister was. After all these years, they might finally have a clue to Samantha Woods' whereabouts.

With all the power Samuel Woods held as their people's appointed leader, it had been hard for him to delegate the search for his sister to someone else. Blake didn't blame him though. If his sister were missing, he wouldn't want someone else

searching for her either.

But as their leader, Sam couldn't devote all his attention to finding Samantha. His mate, Elizabeth, five months pregnant with their first child, needed him by her side, not chasing rumors. That was Blake's job, to find missing *Loup-garou*.

Dawn brightened the morning sky as Blake stood outside the shop. The only question that remained was whether or not he should wait outside until he saw some sign of life or look for a hotel room. He'd had a restless night and set out earlier than planned. The sleepless night was quickly catching up with him as he forced back a yawn.

As if the heavens were listening, one of the upstairs lights began to glow like a beacon lighting his way, beckoning him. "Well, I guess I should take that as a sign." Blake walked up the front steps in search of answers he prayed were finally close at hand.

\* \* \* \*

Alyssa stepped out of the shower and frowned when someone pounded on her apartment door. After wrapping a towel around herself, she raced to the door to look through the peephole. Could it be the man she'd dreamed about? Already? "Who is it?"

"I'm looking for the owner."

Alyssa gasped, certain now that throaty rumble belonged to her mate. Fire raced through her veins in response to the husky timbre. Chills spread down her spine in anticipation. Her nipples began to swell beneath the towel and her clit to pulse with need, something she'd never in all her years experienced before. Her unprecedented sexual response to his voice alone could only mean they were destined mates.

His musky scent wafted from beneath the door, washing over

her in sensual waves. This would not do, she needed to be in control. "Well, you've found her. Who are you and what could you possibly want at six in the morning?"

"I'm sorry it's so early, but I really need to talk to you. My name's Blake Donovan. I'm a Private Investigator. I heard you might be able to help me locate a missing person."

"Hold up your credentials." He sounded sincere, but she wasn't about to let a perfect stranger through the door, especially while only wearing a towel, even if he was whom she'd been expecting. A woman could never be too careful, especially considering the life she led outside her 'legitimate business' one.

It didn't matter that she was a Were-wolf or even that she could defend herself if needed. Her kind had been hunted for far too long to take unnecessary chances with their safety, even if her fate had knocked on the door.

"Look, can we stop speaking through the door. I drove through the night to get here."

"That's not my problem. Hold up your credentials." When she was satisfied they appeared legitimate, she told him, "I'll meet you downstairs in fifteen minutes." She could practically feel his presence in the air. Her insides quivered with uncertainty and nervousness. She took a deep breath, hoping he'd do as she demanded.

She needed some time to get her thoughts in order. Not only her thoughts, but her feelings as well. She didn't doubt that Blake Donovan spoke the truth about why he came to her. She just wondered if he was prepared for who he was to her, her mate. The missing half of her soul.

She broke into a sweat as she gently worried her bottom lip with her teeth. She wasn't ready yet. Hell, she wasn't even dressed yet. She couldn't go to her man looking like this. Swallowing past the lump in her throat, Alyssa turned toward her



bedroom.

She only had fifteen minutes to pull herself together. She knew she was going to need every second to prepare for their meeting.

\* \* \* \*

Blake sighed, his head leaning against the closed door, knowing he wasn't going to be able to change her mind about letting him inside. It was early by anyone's standards, but he was so close to reaching his goal. Patience wasn't something he possessed much of anyway, but when he was close to finding the answers he wanted, he could be a little pushy.

Fine, he could wait fifteen minutes. It's not like she could get out of the building without him knowing. Besides, she didn't have any reason to run. At least he didn't think she did.

Running his hand through his hair, Blake turned toward the stairs leading outside. It wouldn't do him any good to wait outside her door. More than likely it would only perturb her further. He didn't want this woman pissed off at him. Something in her voice warned him she was someone he didn't want to cross. Maybe because of the effect she'd had on him as he stood impatiently outside her door. He could swear the hair on the back of his neck stood up at attention when he first heard her muffled voice answering his knock.

Still, he had a ridiculous urge to run back upstairs and beg her to let him in. At the sound of her voice, everything inside him seemed to stand still, to quiet down. He didn't even know what she looked like, yet his heart raced as he remembered her husky tone. Her voice had him thinking about unrelenting passion, silken sheets and Chateau Margeaux at midnight. Only his urgent need for her cooperation kept him from charging back upstairs

and pounding on her door until she either let him in or called the police. Until he discovered if Samantha Woods had passed through this stop, Blake would be all business. As a Private Investigator, he'd learned the hard way that it was never wise to antagonize someone who might hold valuable information.

At the bottom of the steps, Blake sighed and tapped his fingers against the stairwell's iron banister. He was as tense as a bowstring ready to fire, that is, until he took the time to notice his surroundings. He heard the ocean waves roll onto the shoreline. He saw the water surge in the distance and watched the seagulls glide over the whitecaps, dipping their wings in search of fresh fish to catch.

His breath hitched at the beauty around him. He watched the tourists as they began to litter the shoreline. Children with plastic shovels and pails started building sandcastles along the mostly deserted beach. Blake was surprised there were people on the beach at all at such an early hour. Then again, if he lived this close to the ocean, he'd probably be walking its shoreline before dawn every day.

Blake still faced the ocean when he felt her presence move up behind him. His entire body went on alert, his blood ran hot and thick, his pulse skyrocketed. His cock went rock hard, urgently demanding release from the confines of his jeans. If he hadn't been preoccupied when he'd been standing outside her door, he would have been prepared for his next shocking revelation. She was his mate. He could smell it, sense it in every part of him. She was his other half and the timing sucked.

Not only did he have his leader's twin sister to find, he had something more personal to attend to—his father's destruction.

How was he supposed to court a mate at such a time? How could he not? As if he had a choice. He was unable to turn and face her, his feet frozen in place. His destiny stood behind him

and he was afraid to look her in the eye.

Blake felt her nervousness. He could hear her beating heart above the ocean's roar and sensed her fear as she approached. He could feel their telepathic bond blinking to life in his mind. Final proof that they were destined to be together. As if he needed proof beyond his body's demands.

He didn't know what he'd been expecting when he was finally able to turn and face her, but it certainly wasn't the vision standing before him. Her eyes sparkled like the finest emeralds and her auburn hair was a mass of riotous curls that framed her heart-shaped face in wanton fire. But it was her luscious curves that grabbed his attention and held it like a dog would a particularly juicy bone.

Dressed as a gypsy in a peasant shirt and long flowing skirt, she epitomized Mother Earth. She wasn't model thin like so many women were these days, but was instead, pleasantly rounded. Her breasts would fill his hands and her hips looked custom made to cradle his. Blake shook his head to clear it. Now where had that thought come from? He needed to stick to business, even if his body currently screamed for release.

With his hormones raging, he couldn't stop staring at her, all thoughts, save one, wiped from his mind. His instincts were shouting at him to take her to the nearest bed where he could mount her, mark her and make her irrevocably his.

## *Chapter Two*

As he stared at her, speechless, Alyssa took her own inventory. To see that Blake was as good looking as her dream man proved a pleasant relief. But the true test would be his personality.

A couple of inches shy of six feet tall, he cut an imposing figure. His sculpted muscles peeked from beneath his black t-shirt and well-worn jeans, which encased powerful thighs. His hair, a rich, deep mahogany, swept along his broad shoulders and his eyes, piercingly clear sapphire, seemed to look clear into her soul. He looked like he belonged on the cover of a woman's magazine.

He had an air about him. Power and control radiated from him. It was obvious, at least to her, he was a strong man, both physically and emotionally. She felt his tension, his desire, his nervousness, even without establishing a mental link with him. There wasn't a doubt in her mind that he was a man a gal could lean on in a crisis. He wouldn't turn away at the thought of facing danger. All in all, she figured he would make a good mate. That is, if he could handle the fact that she wasn't the clingy type, dependent upon a man for her happiness. They continued to stare at each other, he as obviously lost in his thoughts as she in hers.

He recovered first, offering his hand in acknowledgement. "Hi. Like I said earlier, I'm Blake Donovan. I have some questions I need to ask you."

"They must be important to have you knocking on my door just after sunrise."

"You could say that. And you are?"

"Oh...sorry." She didn't know what to say to him that wouldn't sound crazy. Introducing herself as his wife wouldn't be the smartest thing she could do. "My name's Alyssa Maguire. What can I help you with?"

"Look, would you mind if we talked privately, maybe walked along the beach where we won't be overheard?"

She glanced down the street, along the beach, indecision about being alone with him warring with her need to learn more about this man fated to be her husband. She didn't like being unsure of herself or of her decisions. It made her feel weak and spineless. Coming to a decision, she straightened and looked him straight in the eyes. Courage, she told herself. Have courage. "Sure, let me go get my sweater." Turning, she headed back up the stairs, smiling quietly to herself at the sound of Blake's fingers tapping against the banister. Perhaps she wasn't the only one nervous. That eased her feelings just as bit, allowing her to quickly retrieve her sweater feeling a little better about the situation.

They walked together and, as they did, she felt torn between feelings of a deep-seated sense of belonging and everyday commonsense telling her that they didn't know each other well enough for her to have such emotions. By the look on Blake's face, he was having similar thoughts.

After a few minutes of tense silence, Blake stopped to look out over the ocean. She stood beside him, waiting as patiently as possible for whatever he needed to speak to her about. Seagulls

bobbed over the waves, fishing for their breakfast. The sound of a couple's laughter drifted above the ocean's roar as they raced through the surf. It was peaceful here, soothing.

"What did you want to talk to me about? It must be pretty important." She waited a beat, then added, "at least to you." She wasn't foolish enough to believe he was searching for his mate and just happened to stumble upon her. He was after something. That much was obvious, by both his silence and his demeanor, by the expressions chasing across his face.

"I'm looking for someone."

"Well, duh! Could you be a little more specific?"

"I understand you run something like an underground railroad, that you help our people find safe places to hide."

"How did you hear about that?" All of a sudden, she looked around, feeling hunted, unsure of herself and how to answer his questions.

"It's what I do. I find those who want to remain hidden."

"Who are you looking for?"

"Let me ask you a question first. How long have you been doing what you do?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I'm looking for someone who may or may not have used your services, but this would have been close to twenty years ago."

"There are extensive records in the tunnels below the shop. Who are you looking for?" she asked again, frustration evident in her voice. Why wouldn't he answer the damn question already?

"How much do you know about how our people are living? You're unknown to us."

"I know the basics. I know we elect our leader through the Council of Elders. We're endangered. Our people hunted. We're almost extinct and if we are lucky enough to find our mates, we

remain together for life, just as wolves in the wild do.” She paused, looked out over the waves a moment before continuing. “I know it’s forced us to go into hiding in order to survive so there may be more of us than we think. If I’ve been doing my job right anyway.”

“Good. That brings me to why I called on you this morning. I’m looking for a woman.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. A woman? At once, black rage filled her, making her sick with it. “What’s her name?” There was no way to keep the jealousy out of her voice, to hide the growl reverberating through her chest. He wasn’t supposed to be looking for another woman. She didn’t care if they did just meet, he was hers and she was his. There would be no other woman for him. He just better get that thought straight through his head right now. She didn’t care if her reaction was all out of proportion. She wasn’t about to stand by while he thought about another woman.

Blake must have sensed her growing rage because he quickly finished his explanation. “Our king, his name’s Samuel Woods, in case you didn’t know... Well, he’s been looking for his twin sister for almost twenty years. We’re hoping you may have records of whether or not she was given safe passage.”

“Why isn’t he looking for her himself?”

“Because, Elizabeth, his mate, is pregnant with their first child and he wants to be by her side, needs to be there. If we can at least pick up his sister’s trail, we may be able to reunite them. It’s a long shot, I admit, but he deserves some closure one way or the other. Sam has been searching for his sister for years. You can imagine he’s feeling torn about letting me search for her instead. Besides, we don’t have any proof she’s still alive, just Sam’s gut feeling that she managed to escape his parents’ fate.”

“Well, I *can* understand that. What if I can’t help you? Then

what will you do?"

"Then I'll try and find others who may have given her safe passage."

Alyssa didn't like that idea at all. Blake was her other half. She wanted time to get to know him before he went chasing after the woman, but she couldn't deny him her help. It wasn't in her to deny assistance to those in need.

She turned around, heading back along the boardwalk toward her shop. "I can get you in touch with the other stops along the route. There are six other locations along the railroad that I know for a fact are still in operation. One on the West Coast, in Monterey, California, one in the bayous of Louisiana, this one here on the East Coast and four international stops. One is in Paris, one's in London, one's in Haiti and the final stop is in Egypt. From there we send them wherever they need to be with enough money to survive on while they get settled in their new homes."

\* \* \* \*

Blake walked by Alyssa's side, thinking over what she was telling him. How had they managed to keep such a tight lid on everything they did to help their people? It must have been a challenge to keep the railroad moving, never mind the operational costs. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Oh, nearly all my life. I arrived here all alone after my parents were murdered and Mr. and Mrs. Peters, my foster parents, took me in. I was ten then. Now, fifteen years later, I run this stop along the railroad entirely on my own." She must have seen the frown etched between his brows and taken it for disapproval because she quickly continued, "I had good teachers though. It's not as if I was completely alone."



"You've accomplished so much at such a young age. It's amazing you found your way here alone. You've taken on so much as an adult in helping our people, without any support."

"Just because I'm a woman doesn't mean I can't have the strength and will to do this."

He reached for her hand, pulling her to a stop. The feel of her skin next to his electrified him. Every nerve ending in his body zinged at full charge. It made it difficult to think and nearly impossible to speak coherently. Especially when the more time they spent together, the more his inner wolf demanded he mount her, sink his cock so deep inside her snug pussy she'd never forget the feel of him inside her. "I didn't mean it that way. What I meant was that I'm amazed. You're a jewel to our people. Aren't you lonely manning this stop by yourself? Don't you want to meet the rest of our kind?"

His hands held hers in a firm grasp. He could feel her practically melting beneath his touch. Her scent thickened in the air, a mixture of arousal and curiosity. Her pulse jumped beneath his fingertips, increasing its pace the longer he held onto her. She jerked her hand back, apparently not wanting Blake to know how his touch affected her.

"Somebody has to be here at all times. I never know when someone's going to show up at my shop, looking for a place to hide. They need a safe place to stay while my contacts forge identification and passports."

"I imagine you must be forced to deal with some unsavory people if you are having documents forged. Doesn't it make you nervous?"

Taking the keys out of her pocket, Alyssa unlocked her shop door and stepped inside, Blake following close behind her. "I probably would be nervous if that were the case. I have a techno-junkie who handles all my identification needs. He's a bored rich

kid with nothing else to do.”

“You get a lot of those around here? Bored rich kids that is.”

“We have enough. Some of these homes along the beach cost millions.”

Blake glanced around Alyssa’s shop. It was more showroom than anything else. Display cases, each one filled with richness and beauty, lined all four walls. He’d never seen so much radiance and grandeur in one place before. It was as if every piece of jewelry was designed to have a life of its own, a soul captured within its bejeweled depths.

Pendants and rings, pins and earrings, bracelets and necklaces held gems of every shape, size and color. There were jewels of every imaginable type and pieces that were beyond anything he could have imagined. It was like comparing a dinghy to a cruise ship. They could both float, but the cruise ship epitomized luxury and indulgence.

To say her gift overwhelmed him was an understatement. “This is absolutely amazing.” He saw her face, could practically feel her heart leap in response at his praise.

“Thank you,” she replied. “Every piece is unique. I never do the same piece twice.”

“That must take an enormous amount of creativity.”

“Just as a painter has to capture his subject’s soul in a portrait, so does a jeweler when shaping and cutting a gem. Every gem has a spirit buried in its depths. The secret is to bring it out for the entire world to see. If you can do that, then you’re a gem artist.”

He noticed the joy her work gave her blazing in her eyes. They were sparkling with vibrancy, with life. It was breathtaking to witness. Would she bring that kind of passion to the bedroom, he wondered? He couldn’t wait to find out for himself.

Blake cleared his throat, intent on keeping his emotions in

check. It wouldn't do for her to know her artist's soul was important to him. There would be plenty of time for that once he found Samantha and destroyed the aberration his father had become. He needed to keep his mind focused on what he was here to do and not what he really wanted to do to Alyssa. "Where do I find these records of yours?" he asked.

"I keep them in a secret room beneath us," she answered.

"You have a whole room down there? I didn't realize there was a basement in here."

"No one does. This building was already in place before they dug out the basement. From the outside, you can't tell there's another floor beneath us running along the structure's entire length. That's the safest way to hide our people—in plain sight. We have room for several cots, some other amenities and bookshelves that hold all of our records and journals."

"How do you access it?"

"There's a panel behind a row of filing cabinets. If you're not looking for it, you'd never know it was there."

"Can you take me there? I want to get started with my search." He could imagine there were dozens of diaries in the secret room written by those passing through, histories of entire families, tales of love and loss, happiness and despair, hope and fear. He only hoped someone had noticed and commented on Samantha.

"Follow me," she said.

At this point, only a Vampire attack would prevent him from following her. It was hard to keep his mind on his mission—nearly impossible really. His body hummed with hot energy, sizzled with desire. They'd just met, but he knew her, knew they would complete each other as no one else could. Two perfect halves of one soul. True Mates.

As they entered the shop's back room, Blake let out a low

whistle. If he thought her showroom impressive, nothing compared to the treasures spread out in front of him now. Dozens of pieces of jewelry, in various stages of completion, were scattered across her workbench. Rings, pendants, necklaces, earrings, castings and tools lay strewn all across the tabletop. Filing cabinets lined the opposite wall and a massive roll-top desk filled the rest of the space. Her workspace was a blend of magnificence and commerce, the coming together of artist and businesswoman in one creative and practical soul. “These pieces are fantastic.”

She looked over her shoulder, glancing at the pieces of jewelry lying about. “Thank you,” she replied.

“Aren’t you afraid to let these things sit back here unsecured like this?” he asked.

“Why would I? The back door is bolted from the inside and the only way for someone to get back here is either from the cellar or from the shop.”

“Still, you can never be too careful.”

“If I’m going to be robbed, it’s just as likely to happen while I’m here as not. Sometimes I’m working here into the wee hours of the morning,” she stated.

“That doesn’t make you nervous? Being here alone at night, I mean.” His heartbeat picked up a pace as he awaited her answer. Nothing could happen to her. He wouldn’t allow it—couldn’t allow it.

“I do get nervous, but I’ve had vandals break my storefront window several times before without actually robbing me. You seem to be forgetting the advantage I *do* have. I’m *Loup-garou*, a Were-wolf. We’re not so easily defeated, especially by a mere Human.”

Blake shook his head at her apparent lack of fear. She needed to take better care of herself, be more aware of her

surroundings. He had to admit though, to have such a steel will, she must have endured much tragedy and trauma growing up.

Obviously, her parents taught her to believe in herself, to be strong in the face of the unknown. He couldn't imagine a woman as strong as Alyssa would let vandals go without teaching them a good lesson. "Why haven't you pressed charges against the vandals? Or taken care of the matter yourself?" he asked, his voice laden with disapproval.

"It's not as easy as you think. I haven't had the time to track them down. I can pick out their scent, but I haven't been able to leave long enough to do so."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because, right at this moment, there is a family hiding down below. They've been here for a week. I should have their travel papers and IDs in the next few days. I need to stay close in case they need help. Until they leave, I can't track my vandal."

"And you do this all on your own all the time?"

"Somebody has to do it," she quipped. "Too many of our people have died and we need to save everyone we can, otherwise Vampires will eradicate us. Then who would protect the Humans from the undead?"

"So how many are below? Should we be bringing them food and such?"

"Not to worry. I keep a refrigerator stacked with lunchmeats and everyday staples. And of course, plenty of milk and juice for the children. I usually go down when I close the shop for lunch. It's about the only time I can pretend I'm in the back room working."

With ridiculous ease, she pulled the filing cabinet from the wall. He raised his eyebrow in silent question.

"What? You don't think the females of our race are weak, do you?"

"I wouldn't have said weak, just not as strong," he replied.

She smirked. "Well, I guess I proved you wrong then," she replied as she faced the panel in front of her.

There he could see a lever, barely noticeable, worked into the seam of the paneling on the wall. After pressing the latch, the door silently swept open, revealing a sturdy stairway.

Leaning her head into the opening, Alyssa hollered out, "It's just me. I have a friend with me. One of us. He's heading down and I'll be right behind him."

"We're ready," a muffled voice responded.

Alyssa nodded, then waved her hand toward the open doorway. "Go on down. I'll be right behind you. I've got to grab something."

Considering they dug the cellar out of the dirt, Blake expected the room to be musky smelling, cramped and damp. He thought it would be cave like, literally a hole in the wall, so to speak. Instead, it was the exact opposite.

It was a studio apartment. In one corner was a mini-kitchen complete with a refrigerator, a tiny apartment stove and a small table with chairs. At the opposite side of the room, several roll away beds lined the wall. In the center, a big screen television sat on a pedestal surrounded by two sofas and an easy chair. On the floor, in front of the sofas, playing a game, were two little girls and their parents.

What he hadn't expected, what really shocked him, was that he knew the refugees. He'd last seen them at a gathering his people held several years back at the California compound. It wasn't surprising that his voice was tinged with shock when he called out to them, startling the group spread across the basement floor. "Rodney, Pamela...is that you?"

"Oh...my...God," Rodney whispered, looking up.

"Well, if it isn't Blake Donovan. What are you doing here? Are

you on the run, too?" the woman asked.

"No, not at all. I was sent here to try and find clues about Sam's sister." Blake could only stare at them. He knew Alyssa helped their people, kept them hidden until they could be moved to safety, but he hadn't expected it to hit so close to home.

As a child, Rodney was his constant companion. They spent their time running wild, fishing, sailing and building forts in the woods. He hadn't seen his friend since he attended the gathering for Rodney and Pamela's wedding years earlier.

Looking at the kids, Blake was surprised to see how old the little ones were, the smallest at least five years old. What could have happened since he'd last seen his friend that would have his whole family on the run?

He didn't have time to question him before Alyssa returned. She entered the room silently. Of course, he knew she was there before he saw her. She was that much a part of him already.

Blake didn't doubt their bond would grow stronger the more they were in each other's presence. At this point in time, with all the things that needed his attention, he didn't know if their connection would be a godsend or a detriment. He only knew he wouldn't be able to deny it much longer.

"I see you've met the Clancy's," she said.

"Actually," Blake said, "Rodney and I grew up together. We lived in the same compound as children."

"Oh really," Alyssa replied. "I didn't realize there were still compounds of our people out there."

Blake smiled. "What do you think all of those doomsday camps are all about? We have to have some cover and a group of people preaching about the end of the world is usually left alone in their encampments. We can go unnoticed there, living with as much freedom as possible among our own kind without the fear of discovery. At least, that's how it was when I was a child."

"I just hadn't realized," she countered.

He could sense that she felt foolish for not realizing some still lived the old ways. How had she grown up, alone? What left her near ignorant about the way the *Loup-garou* still lived? Didn't she know it was only recently that their people were forced to live in hiding, packs separated across the world?

Over the last few decades their people drifted apart, moving to places not visited by outsiders, content to live out their own lives in peace. They figured living lives separate from others of their kind would increase their survival rate. In the past, Vampires chose to attack during celebrations and gatherings, killing large groups of Were-wolves all at once.

Blake turned to his old friend, gripped his shirt and pulled him into a fierce hug. "It's so good to see you, my friend. I should have visited the compound more often these last few years. Your girls have grown like weeds."

Alyssa and Pamela shared what appeared to be a look of perfect understanding, then left the men to catch up. They went and sat with the children who were intent on finishing the game.



## Chapter Three

"It's great to see you, Rod," said Blake. "What are you doing here?"

"I wish we were meeting again under better circumstances. The news isn't good, Blake. Not good at all."

"Tell me what's going on." Blake knew this man, knew his family, his friends. His mother lived in the same commune. They called themselves *The Refuge* and posed as a survivalists group. "Where's my mother?"

Rodney waved his arm, shepherding Blake toward the table and chairs. "You better sit down."

Blake didn't want to sit. Instead, he paced, circling the small table, around and around while he waited for Rod to get on with his news. "Just spit it out, Rodney. I can handle the news."

"It's not what you think," he said. "At least, I hope not."

"What does that mean?"

"It started out like a normal day. We were just going about our business. The children were playing in the center of the commune. The few adults at the compound during the day were hard at work, watching the children, doing chores. You know how it is."

"Anyway, as everyone was about their business, a child began screaming. This wasn't an I-fell-down-and-hurt-myself scream. It

was a bone-chilling, skin-crawling, please-stop-killing-me kind of scream. Everyone raced toward the screaming little girl. Your mother reached her first. You know how Jeanne is when it comes to the children. She treats every child like they're her own." Rodney paused, apparently not wanting to go on with his account.

"Finish the story, Rod. What happened to my mother?"

"She went racing toward the little girl, reaching her side within moments of her scream. Jeanne was just on the outskirts of camp when she saw the child using her arms to drag herself forward, leaving a bloody trail in her wake. Both her lower legs were gone, amputated just below the knee as though ripped from her body. She was losing blood so fast. Your mom and everyone else were completely focused on the girl. I'm telling you man, Brianna looked like someone had picked her up by her feet and broke the bottom of her legs off one by one. None of us had ever seen such a thing in all our years fighting the Vampire. Your mother, she was crooning to the little girl, knowing that Brianna was dying and that there wasn't anything she could do for her except offer comfort.

"Several of our people went into the woods where Brianna had been playing, intent on destroying whatever had mauled her. Nothing that could do that to a child should live. Vampires usually don't rip their victims apart so we figured we were after one of our own." Rodney cast his eyes downward, afraid of the pain and the censure that might be visible in Blake's eyes.

"While we were all hunting the butcher who attacked her, those remaining at the camp rounded up all the children and brought them to the escape tunnels. Only your mother stayed behind with Brianna. Jeanne refused to leave her while she was still alive. Instead she picked up the little one's mangled body and carried her toward the tunnels."

Blake knew what was coming next. He knew his mother. Full of compassion, she wouldn't have left Brianna while she still drew air, even if it left her open to attack. As a child, he'd heard his mother say often enough that no one should ever die alone.

"Our people searched for hours for the monster without any luck. It was as if he'd just vanished in a puff of smoke. When we returned to the compound, we found everyone in the tunnels beneath it. Everyone save your mother and Brianna. Myself and a few of the others, went topside to search for her. We found a trail of blood leading toward the far side of the compound, near the cliffs. Just before the drop off, the trail disappeared. We don't know if they went over the side or if they were captured.

"Our council decided the area wasn't safe any longer, that our compound would have to dissolve until we could determine who or what had attacked our people." Rod paused, looked at his wife and children, then once again met Blake's gaze. "That brings us to why we're here seeking refuge. I searched for them for days through the woods. Your mom was a second mother to me, you know that Blake."

Blake nodded, knowing his mother considered Rod another son.

"For three days, Pamela and I stayed at the compound, hoping your mother would return with the little girl or at least tell us where she cremated the remains. We finally set off on our own and prayed your mother would reach out to you."

Blake's heart was hurting, his mind almost numb. He never heard Alyssa's approach, until her hand was resting against his back.

"What? What is it?" Alyssa asked.

"Blake's mother has disappeared," said Rodney. "No one has a telepathic connection to her except Blake."

"Can you still feel her Blake?" Alyssa asked.

"I don't sense her, but I don't feel her loss either. Perhaps she's unconscious or drugged. I'd know it if she were dead. I'd feel the hole her death would leave behind." Blake's pain was all-encompassing. He was angry that his childhood home had been attacked and desolate that his mother who'd never harmed another living soul was possibly in the hands of a monster. More than that, he blamed himself for her disappearance.

He met Rod's gaze. "Why was she left alone with the child?" The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. "Someone should have stayed behind with them." He curled his lip. "Did they all run like frightened curs, leaving my mother and a dying child to fend for themselves?"

"I—I don't know, Blake. I was with the group that left to search for the beast." Rod put his hand on his shoulder. "Calm down, Blake. I can understand your anger, but placing blame isn't going to find her faster and it isn't going to save her life."

Blake took a deep breath. A part of him knew Rod was right. Another part wanted to find every adult who had left his mother to fend for herself and a dying child and tear them to pieces. Did he feel that way because of guilt? He should have spent more time with his mother, spent more time at the commune.

He had to find her. The only way to do that was go back to the commune and leave the search for Sam's sister for another agent. That meant leaving Alyssa as well. That thought hurt more than he thought it would. He'd only known her a few hours, but already she was important to him. For the first time in his life, in Alyssa's presence, he felt whole, complete.

Alyssa spoke calmly, saying, "Well then, we have to find her now, don't we?"

"You've already told me you can't leave here."

Alyssa turned toward Rodney who cradled Pamela in his arms. "Will you be able to stay here until we return? I can close

the shop for a while, until we bring his mother home.”

Rodney looked back and forth between the pair. Blake could see Rodney wondering what was going on between him and Alyssa besides the obvious conversation.

Turning back to Blake, Alyssa rested her hand over Blake's pounding heart. *You need to search for your mother and I need to be with you to help you find her.*

It was the first time she'd tried using telepathic communication with Blake and the first time either one of them had voiced any type of bond between them.

Blake was torn. Not wanting to put Alyssa in harm's way, but not willing to leave her here either. Rodney and his family had been through enough. He'd have to make arrangements for another of their people to man the stop. That's all there was to it. All Blake knew was that his every instinct demanded he bring Alyssa along, dangerous or not. Blake put his hand over Alyssa's, holding her hand against his beating heart. *If you insist on coming along, we need to have someone, without a family, operate this stop. It's too dangerous otherwise.*

*I should have thought of that myself. I must sound really selfish to you.*

*You couldn't be selfish if you tried.* He enjoyed speaking to her mind to mind. It seemed so much more intimate and it confirmed his belief that she was his one true mate and bound to him for the rest of their days. Blake turned back to his friends who'd been silently joined by their little girls. "I can't ask you to stay here, Rod. I'll make arrangements for someone else to man this station. Someone without a family."

"Do you have someone in mind?" Alyssa asked.

"I think so." Searching the pockets of his leather Jacket, Blake pulled out his cell phone. It didn't take a second before he realized that he'd run the battery down...again. "Do you have a

phone I can use?"

"Sure. There's one in my workspace upstairs."

After nodding to the group, Blake turned around and headed up the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

Once Blake disappeared from sight, Alyssa bent down to talk to the little girls. "So who wants to play another game?"

Both girls cried, "Me."

Taking hold of both their hands, Alyssa led the children back to the abandoned game, leaving Pamela and Rodney to worry about their friend.

"I don't know how Blake's going to handle it if he doesn't find his mother," whispered Pamela. "She was so very proud of him, of what he was doing to help locate our people. Do you think he knows that?"

"I think," said Rodney, "that right now all he's thinking about is how he let her down."

"She wouldn't blame him for her disappearance."

"I never said she would, Pammy. This is Blake though. You and I both know he feels that he has to save the world. After finding out that he was the result of rape, he's gone out of his way to track down the Vampires that are plaguing Humanity and the *Loup-garou* alike."

"What do Vampires have to do with it?" she asked.

"You don't know?" he replied.

"Nobody's said a word to me about it."

"I heard my parents mention it before they left this world. Blake's father was a Were-wolf turned Vampire."

"Oh my God. He must be so upset, knowing all that she'd been through already."

\* \* \* \*

Once at the top of the stairs, Blake looked back over his shoulder at Alyssa. She was lying on the floor, right along with the kids, their three heads close together. The littlest girl, Maggie, started giggling at something Alyssa said while the oldest just rolled her eyes. He took one more second to watch them and then walked into the office.

Looking at the pile of odds and ends on her desk, Blake figured Alyssa must just toss things on top of it in a hurry to get to work. There were coffee cups half full next to a jeweler's loupe, a scarf and gloves atop a pile of design sketches. Inventory lists and customer orders lay beneath a huge book of Celtic gem designs. Who was he to judge her?

Alyssa had the rare ability to see the beauty in all things and bring it out for others to see so whatever worked for her was fine with him. After a quick search, Blake found the phone hidden beneath a catalogue of jeweler's tools and a couple of sweaters tossed in a jumble. After punching in the number, Blake waited for the phone to be picked up on the other end.

"Hello," came the groggy reply.

"Is that you, Sam?" Blake asked. "You sound half asleep." In fact, he sounded well relaxed. It didn't take a genius to know Sam was very happy with Blake's cousin, Elizabeth.

"What's up? You're not calling just to chit chat are you?"

"As a matter of fact, the news I have isn't very good."

In an instant, Sam went from friend to leader, his voice heavy with concern. "What's going on? Is this about my sister?"

"I wish I did have news about her. This is about my mother though."

"Jeanne?"

"The Refuge was attacked, Sam," whispered Blake, his voice filled with sorrow and guilt.

"You can't blame yourself, Blake. How many times did you ask your mother to join you? How many times did she turn you down so that she could be around the children?"

Blake stayed silent.

"Can you tell if she's still alive?"

"When I try to reach her telepathically, she isn't there. She doesn't feel dead to me though."

"It's the same way I feel about my sister," said Sam. "You have to look for her."

"I was hoping that's what you would say." Blake sighed in relief before going on. "I do have another problem though, it's the reason I'm calling you."

"I'll help in any way I can, Blake. You know that."

"As I said before, I was hoping you'd say that. You do remember that I was going to the Jersey Shore to check out a safe house I heard about there, don't you?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"There's only one way to say it and that's just to spill it. As it turns out, the woman who runs this stop is my true mate."

There was a pause and then finally Sam responded, absolute joy in his voice. "Congratulations, my friend. I'm so happy for you. At least you found some good in all this tragedy."

"I can't leave her behind while I search for my mother."

"So what is it you need, if it's not protection for your other half?"

"I need someone to man this stop in case others try to flee to safety."

"So, it's true," Sam replied awe in his tone. "There really is a network set up to help our people escape."

"Yes, sir. Besides this stop, there are six others up and



running.”

“Perhaps, if they all keep records we’ll be that much closer to finding not only Samantha, but all of our missing people.”

“I was thinking Sebastian might like to step in and help. You know how unsettled he’s been since both his brother and you have found your mates. There are journals here with names and dates of all that have passed through. Perhaps he could look through the journals, maybe find a sign of where your sister may be.”

“I’ve noticed,” said Sam “that Sebastian appears to have lost his joy in living. You know, I believe this could be just what he needs to feel alive again. I think you might be right. Sebastian keeps my jet fueled and ready to go so he should fly out within a few hours.” After pausing a moment to collect his thoughts, Sam said, “Have faith in yourself. You *will* find her. I have no doubt.” After a quick goodbye, Sam hung up the phone.

Blake stood there listening to the dial tone for a few more moments before he noticed Alyssa standing behind him, silently listening to his side of the conversation.

“Well,” she asked. “I gather your friend Sebastian will be coming here.”

Blake couldn’t take his gaze off her. She was so beautiful to him. With her luscious auburn hair, her sparkling emerald eyes and a body to drool over, never mind her forthright and sparkling personality, she was everything he’d hoped to find in a mate. Her beauty surpassed that of the Hawaiian fire goddess, Pele.

Perhaps he wouldn’t have chosen now to meet his other half, not while his mother was missing and the hunt for his father was ongoing, but he wasn’t going to worry about the timing anymore. Life was too short and too precious to waste a single moment of it complaining.

“What? Oh...um...” For a second there, Blake couldn’t quite remember what Alyssa had asked. “Yes. Sebastian will be here in a few hours. Once he’s here, I don’t want to waste any time before we head out.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be ready,” answered Alyssa. “I’m going to run to the grocery store while we’re waiting. The pantry down there needs to be replenished before we head out.”

“Right. Mind if I tag along?” Whether he just wanted to keep himself busy so as not to think about his mother’s disappearance or he simply wanted to spend time with Alyssa, he didn’t know. Then again, perhaps it was a little of both.

“Don’t you want a chance to catch up with your friend?” Alyssa asked.

Maybe knowing that in just a few hours she would be in Blake’s company exclusively, Alyssa needed to regroup. He thought the only way she knew to do that was to go to the store alone. Sensing Alyssa’s growing unease, or perhaps it was Alyssa’s feminine instincts for self-preservation kicking in, Blake agreed to stay behind. After having just found her, he wasn’t going to take a chance on scaring her off before the mating ritual was complete. Besides, he had only to remember that in a few short hours she would be by his side for always. He could be patient with Alyssa, knowing that after solving the mystery of his mother’s disappearance, they’d have time to get to know one another, to become mates in the truest sense of the word. So giving Alyssa a little space now would be well worth it in the end.

That thought left Blake almost giddy with joy. He’d have someone to share his happiness with and someone to share his sorrows. Someone to share the cool winter nights with and someone to share the hot summer days. Someone to love who would love him in return. And more than all that, with Alyssa he’d found the only person who could complete him, making

him whole for the first time in his life, filling up all the empty spaces in his heart and mind. Who could ask for anything more? "Well, if you don't mind, I think I *will* stay here. There's more I'd like to ask Rod and Pamela."

She headed toward the doorway, looking over her shoulder at Blake, seemingly content to have him in her home. "I'll be back within the hour," she called.

Blake watched her walk out the door and lock it behind her. He was entranced with her fox-like sashay as she started down the sidewalk. When she turned the corner and he couldn't see her anymore, he made his way back down the tunnel.

Pam and Rodney were waiting for him when he returned. "I have a couple of questions."

"What did you want to know, Blake?" Pamela asked.

There were so many questions he needed to ask. So many fears clamored for attention he didn't know where to begin. He was paralyzed, unable to think beyond his pain.

"There's not much more to tell, but we'll be happy to answer any questions you have. We *will* help you, if it's at all possible," Rod pledged.

Blake shook his head. There was no way he'd put his friends and their family in jeopardy. Information was enough. "When did this all take place?" he asked, almost choking on the words.

"About three weeks ago," whispered Pamela. "We were preparing for the Fall Festival when the attack occurred."

"Was my mother the only one to disappear from the compound?"

"Yes," replied Rodney, his voice dripping with concern. "It was almost as if someone who knew your mother, set out to personally snare her in a trap. Anyone who knew Jeanne would know she'd never leave a child unprotected. It would be the perfect ploy to isolate your mother. Of course, this could just be

my imagination running amok, but it just struck me as odd that only the little girl was attacked.”

“So, Rod,” pondered Blake, “you think it was all a setup from the beginning? The whole attack, everything?”

“That’s what my gut tells me, yes,” he replied.

## Chapter Four

When Alyssa returned home, laden with enough groceries to last several weeks, Blake stood out front, pacing as he talked into his cell phone. It was noon so the streets and sidewalks teemed with beach bound tourists.

He sensed her approach and quickly disconnected his call, grabbing a the bags out of her hand. "Did you get everything you needed?" he asked. If it wasn't for the reserved parking in front of her shop, Alyssa would have had to park at least a block away, lugging in the groceries a bag or two at a time.

He held the door to the shop open, breathing in Alyssa's unique scent, a mixture of lavender and sunshine as she walked passed. "All set. This should fill up the larder in case of any new arrivals."

Several trips back to the car replenished the basement pantry. Blake couldn't keep his eyes off Alyssa. He was mesmerized as she bent in front of him and emptied the sacks. Her jeans cupped her bottom, emphasizing her generous curves and long, long legs. He wanted nothing more than to reach out and grab her hips and let her feel the length of his rigid cock pressing against her ass. His heart skipped a beat and then raced on as she reached up to place spare batteries, candles and water in one of the bookcases, giving him a perfect view of her luscious breasts

as her shirt stretched and moved with her.

She was nearly as tall as he was and well rounded. Neither slim nor heavy, he knew she would fit him perfectly—was made to fit him. His hands itched to cup her breasts, to glide along her bottom and lift her just enough so that she could wrap her legs around his waist, lining themselves together, groin to groin. He burned with need, his cock harder than he thought it could ever be.

Alyssa had to feel Blake's gaze burn into her. Her nerves must tingle just as his, leaving her breathless with anticipation. Or was that fear in her eyes? Was she ready to be committed to him? God, he hoped so. There would be no other for her, could be no other. Only him.

Her face was flushed, her breathing erratic. He wondered if she was wet for him, ready to welcome him inside her lush body. It was all happening so fast. Too fast for her more than likely. She would probably appreciate some space, especially if she were feeling overwhelmed. There would be plenty of time to consummate their relationship later.

Alyssa cleared her throat. "That does it," she said, her head down, as if trying to hide the desire written all over her rosy face, but she couldn't hide it from him. "I better get upstairs and get packed." Without glancing back, she bolted for the stairs, taking them two at a time, as if needing to escape.

Blake let her run, content in his knowledge that she also felt the mating heat. Before long, they would have to satisfy their need for each other or risk coming together in violence. Their people mated for life and, at times, they were more wolf than Human, unable to restrain their animal instincts during lovemaking if left aroused for too long.

After gathering his friends in one last fierce hug and wishing them Godspeed, Blake headed up the stairs. He found Alyssa in

her apartment, staring into an empty duffel bag. "I don't even know what to pack," she said. "All I can think about is feeling your body pressed against mine."

Blake was surprised that she'd so readily admit she needed him. He, too, burned with desire, wanted to gather her body into his, possess her as no other man had or would again. Would she always surprise him with her candor, he wondered.

He approached Alyssa, then placed his hands on her shoulders. He felt her tense beneath his palms, her shoulders stiff and unyielding. He didn't know what to say, how to ease her tension. "The mating heat you're feeling is normal. It may not be the best time for us to get together, but that's not something we can change, nor is it something I want to. I've waited a long time to find my mate, to find you." He felt the tension in her shoulders ease a bit.

"Be that as it may, we should be focused on our mission. Our minds should be centered on what we need to accomplish, not wandering, filled with thoughts of sweaty, heart-pounding, mind-numbing, against-the-wall sex."

Blake smiled, his heart raced, his body became even harder in response. "Mind-numbing, you say?" he croaked.

\* \* \* \*

Alyssa felt Blake's erection pressing against her back, smelled his arousal as it thickened the air around them. She desperately wanted to turn around and feel his arms surround her, press herself against his body, under his skin, until they became one. She settled with placing her hands upon his. It was like touching a live wire. She wouldn't be surprised to see sparks flying. The heat between them flared that intensely.

Apparently, their bond was unusually strong and grew tighter

every moment they spent together. Would she be able to keep herself from feeling overwhelmed by his nearness? If she couldn't get her thoughts in order, she wouldn't be much help with Blake's mission. She needed to focus. If only he didn't smell so good, his arms weren't so strong and secure.

Although it pained her to do so, Alyssa stepped out of his embrace, intent on packing for their trip. There would be time enough to snuggle with him once they found his mother.

Blake stepped back, giving them some breathing room. When he was near her, she forgot everything but the need to be close to him, to touch him. They needed clear heads if they were going to find his mother and kill the beast that had attacked the compound.

"How long should I pack for?" she asked.

Blake took a deep breath.

She could tell he was forcing his mind away from thoughts of hot and steamy, bone-melting, jungle sex. There would be time enough for that later on.

"I imagine a week should be enough for now. If it comes to it, we can always purchase whatever you need after we leave here."

"It will only take me a few minutes to pack what I'll need. Then I'll be ready to go."

Blake walked to the bedroom door and stopped to glance at her over his shoulder. "No hurry. Sebastian won't be here for another hour or two. Take your time."

Alyssa didn't move from her spot until she heard Blake's footsteps retreat down the hall toward her living room. She let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She was so flustered she didn't know what to pack. Instead, she just walked to her closet, grabbed a handful of hangers and walked over to the bed, dumping them in the duffel. When the duffel wouldn't



close, she sat on the bed, looking at the jumble of clothes hanging out of the bag. This would not do, she thought.

She dumped the clothes onto the bed and, with meticulous care, repacked her bag. After looking around her room once, Alyssa headed for the bathroom. She wasn't going anywhere without her toothbrush, especially when there was a man nearby that she looked forward to locking lips with.

\* \* \* \*

Blake paced around Alyssa's living room, taking in every detail. All of her furniture was overstuffed and upholstered in luxurious sage green chenille. Her walls were painted to look like aged leather. He thought they called it a faux finish. The effect was warm and welcoming, almost Tuscan in design. Several trade magazines cluttered her coffee table and little dust bunnies covered the breakfast bar. Blake had to smile. She obviously didn't spend much time in her kitchen.

Other than pictures of what must have been her adopted parents on the end table, there were no other photos in the apartment, no art on the walls. It was almost as if she did enough decorating to make herself comfortable, but didn't have, or want, anything extra to make her home more permanent. Perhaps she'd known deep down this was a temporary place, that one day she'd have a reason to leave her home. Of course, Blake thought, he could be way off base with his assumptions.

He was looking through one of her magazines when Alyssa walked into the living room. He felt right at home amongst her things. He could feel her eyes on him.

She watched him for a few seconds before saying, "I'm all set. I just need to get a couple things from downstairs and then I'll be ready to go."

He dropped the magazine back onto the table and walked toward her, letting his gaze roam over her body. She'd taken the time to change into a hunter green sweat suit. He didn't know how Alyssa did it, but she actually made baggy pants and an oversized sweatshirt look fashionable.

It didn't take him but a second to realize that she only had one bag on the floor next to her. From his experience, most women couldn't leave for a trip without several bags, yet here was Alyssa, ready to go with just a single bag. What a woman. "That's it?" he asked, just wanting to make sure.

"Yes. That's it. I need to get something from the safe though. Do you think you can take my bag out to the car?" After a brief pause, she lifted her head, for the first time looking directly into his eyes. "Whose car are we taking, anyway?" she asked.

Her voice, it sounded breathless and throaty, oozing sexuality. He couldn't even look her in the eye without getting completely turned on. He had always professed he was a man that could control himself, not letting his sexual drive get the better of him. Obviously, he was mistaken, because one look at Alyssa and his body raged. Oh, how the mighty have fallen, he thought. "I thought we'd take mine," said Blake.

"Okay then." Alyssa turned and headed for her front door. "I'll be right back," she called over her shoulder.

Blake stared at the spot Alyssa had just vacated. What did he say to make her run from him? Or maybe she was just running from herself, her feelings. "Nothing like wishful thinking," he muttered.

In less than five minutes, she returned, giving no hint as to what she'd needed from the safe. It was probably just her passport. Sure, the compound was in California, but you never knew where the trail might lead. If he had learned anything during his years investigating, it was that one never left home

without their passport. Too many times, he'd been forced to leave the country at a moment's notice in order to follow someone's trail.

"Well," Alyssa announced, "I'm ready whenever you are."

He was just about to respond when his cell phone rang. *Guess it wasn't completely dead after all.* "Donovan."

"I hear I'm going on a trip tonight."

"Hell, Sebastian, I thought you were already on your way."

"Sorry to disappoint you. It was my niece Amy's birthday today. You know how much she loves it when I take her up in the plane," said Sebastian.

"I forgot it was the little one's birthday. How old is she now anyway?"

"So far, she's eight going on forty."

Blake chuckled before growing serious again. How could he laugh when his mother could be at a monster's mercy? "Seriously, when do you think you can get here?" Blake asked.

"I'll be arriving in Newark in about four hours." There was silence on the line as Sebastian became quiet for a moment. "I've been searching for something to say. Hell, Blake, you're one of my best friends. What could I possibly say to you to make things look less grim? I can't even begin to imagine what you must be going through. Just remember that whatever happens, I'm here for you. We all are," Sebastian promised.

"Thanks, Bro. I appreciate it. You want us to pick you up in Newark?"

"Nah... I'll rent a vehicle and drive down."

After giving Sebastian directions, Blake looked up only to find Alyssa's attention centered directly on him. It was a little unnerving to be stared at with such intensity. He couldn't help but wonder if he passed her inspection. Blake closed his phone and put it back in the pocket of his leather jacket. "Looks like it

will be a few more hours.”

“Problems?” Alyssa asked.

“No. Just a delay.”

\* \* \* \*

Alyssa couldn't stop staring at Blake. He looked so sexy in his stonewashed jeans, black t-shirt that sculpted his body and a beat up leather bomber jacket that just screamed *Bad Boy*. Not to mention his deep mahogany hair hanging loose around his face, which just begged a woman to run her fingers through it. *Ooh la la*, she thought. He was one hot man. And he was all hers.

“What are you grinning about?” Blake asked.

“Wouldn't you like to know,” replied Alyssa. “Well, what do you want to do to pass the time?”

“I have a deck of cards or we can go for a walk if you want,” offered Alyssa.

“You know what, that walk sounds like a good idea.”

Maybe the fresh air would help her gain control over her wayward hormones. She couldn't go around in heat forever.

Lost in thought, they both lowered their heads as they made their way back along the boardwalk. The ocean waves washed back and forth along the shore in a gentle rhythm, soothing Alyssa's frayed nerves.

They were both reluctant to disturb the contentment building between them. People rushed here and there, filling the streets and sidewalks, making driving practically impossible for those unfortunate enough to be stuck in their cars. The boardwalk fascinated Blake. He'd commented twice that he had no idea that there were so many restaurants and shops along the beach.

“Are you hungry?” Blake asked.

“I could eat,” she replied

He took her hand, pulling her to a stop. "This is your turf. What do you recommend?"

Alyssa's heart fluttered. It felt so good just to hold his hand. "There's a great steakhouse just down the block."

"Sounds good to me," he answered.

Alyssa kept a hold of Blake's hand as he followed her to the restaurant. It was enough just to be touching him, even if it was just as simple as holding hands.

Within minutes, a waiter ushered Blake and Alyssa to their table. The inside of the eatery was decorated to look like an old fashioned saloon. There were peanut shells on the floor and pictures of dance hall girls on the walls. An antique piano sat against one wall, the person playing it wore a dark suit and a high collar.

"Well, this *is* unique," said Blake.

Whether he was speaking about the restaurant or their sitting at a meal together, Alyssa didn't know.

They ordered steaks...rare and made small talk while they waited for their lunch.

"So how long have you been making jewelry, Alyssa?"

"Goodness, for almost as long as I can remember." Alyssa couldn't help but smile. She could remember her first attempts to create beauty from raw materials. She'd cut and polished rubies until their inner fire shined through. Then used the stones to fashion a bracelet for her foster mother. "I love the entire process, from picking out the perfect jewel and placing it in the perfect setting, to creating one-of-a-kind designs." She gave him a glance, then said, "Now, it's my turn to ask a question, Blake."

"Sure, ask away."

"How long has it been since you've last seen or spoken to your mother?"

"I'm ashamed to say it's been a bit longer than a couple of

months.” Blake sighed.

She could tell he was disappointed with himself.

“I should have spent more time with her. The last time we spoke, she asked me to come back for a visit. I told her I was busy, but would come out to see her soon. Soon...that’s a laugh. It’s been a couple months since I told her that. What kind of son does that make me?”

“Stop beating yourself up. I’m sure your mother never doubted your love for her. Does she know what you have been working on?”

“She knows I’m trying to locate our people and that I’m still trying to track down Sam’s missing sister.”

“Then she knows you would have been there if you could. Nobody could have predicted the attack. We’ll find her, together.” Needing to comfort him, she reached out for his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze just as the cowgirl-dressed waitress placed their lunch in front of them. This lunch date was turning out to be one of Alyssa’s best personal memories.

Less than an hour later, after cheesecake and coffee, Blake spoke up. “Ready to go? Sebastian should be here pretty soon.”

“Okay.” Alyssa placed her hand in Blake’s and nodded as he pulled her to her feet. They paid their bill and headed back toward Alyssa’s home.

Perhaps if she hadn’t been so absorbed in her own thoughts she would have heard the footsteps gaining behind them. It wasn’t until Blake shoved her out of the way that she saw the knife-wielding mugger. Instead of going after Blake as she expected, the mugger approached her.

The thug was so fixed on going after her he wasn’t even paying attention to what Blake was doing. As the mugger turned toward her and she was still lying on the ground somewhat dazed, Blake crouched down and swept the brute’s feet right out

from under him. Instead of doing the smart thing by staying down, the assailant scrambled to his feet, facing Blake for the first time. If she didn't know any better, she would have thought the thug had only just then realized she wasn't alone. But how could that be?

She saw Blake's eyes and knew he would have loved to change into his wolf form just so he could take the joker apart. Unfortunately, the assailant was Human, not Vampire so he couldn't give in to his desire to rip the thug's throat out. It wasn't as if Alyssa couldn't take care of herself, especially when confronted by a Human. It was probably just that the alpha male in him didn't think she should have to fend for herself. She suspected he thought it was his job to keep her safe and that's all there was to it.

Alyssa got back on her feet. She wasn't seriously hurt, except for maybe her pride, which was extremely lucky for the knife-wielding attacker. She knew that instead of dying by Blake's hand, he would be detained and questioned instead.

She watched the assailant toss his knife from hand to hand and back again, hyping himself up to attack. She didn't doubt that their attacker had decided that the only way to get to her was to get Blake out of the way. She saw the stranger's determination to render Blake dead and shook her head in dismay. This was one stupid crook if he couldn't see just how dangerous her mate was right now.

"Drop the knife," Blake demanded.

## Chapter Five

“Go to hell,” the thug shouted. Crouched low and balancing on the balls of his feet, it was obvious from his stance the goon was skilled in knife fighting.

In the end, Blake knew it wouldn’t make a difference. The speed in which his kind could move was the only weapon he’d need to disarm the attacker. “You have one last chance to walk away from here unharmed. Drop the damn knife. Now,” Blake warned.

“No way, man. Just throw me your wallet and no one gets hurt.”

“What do you take me for?” Blake asked. “A fool?”

The mugger circled Blake, brandishing his knife, looking for a way to close in without jeopardizing his safety. His entire focus centered on Blake. It was as if Alyssa, and what he wanted to do to her, could wait.

As the man lunged toward him, Blake watched Alyssa grab the assailant’s knife arm and spin him toward her. He tried to break free, but Alyssa’s grip was as strong as forged steel. She twisted his arm even further, forcing him to drop the knife.

Blake laughed. “Good job,” he said. “He’s not going anywhere now. You might as well let him go.”

“The hell I will. This isn’t a random attack. Is it?” she asked



the thug.

When he didn't answer, Blake watched her use the grip on his arm to force their attacker to his knees, forcing him to look up at them from the vulnerable position. He wasn't subdued though. Blake sensed his anger below the surface. His eyes were hard and his face grim. When all he did was stare back at Alyssa with hate-filled eyes, she turned toward Blake.

"It looks like he doesn't have much to say."

Blake relished Alyssa's show of temper. She was something else, standing there with a man sitting prostrate before her, unable to escape, her eyes flashing with eagerness at the prospect of a fight.

The man was seething all right. Blake was sure their attacker felt this job was supposed to be easy. Just grab the fellow's wallet so his boss could see who was paying attention to his mark.

"What's your name?" Alyssa asked.

A gob of spit splattered her cheek.

Unwilling to see Alyssa being insulted, Blake stepped forward, balled up his fist and punched the assailant square in the gut. Hitting the man might not be the best way to get answers, but it sure as hell felt good.

The mugger's entire body sagged beneath the blow. His defiance obliterated with Blake's attack, unable to hold up his head any longer.

He watched Alyssa reach out with her senses. He could tell she usually didn't use them to invade another's privacy, but there were exceptions to every rule. This was one of them and, through their mind link, Blake listened, too.

*I didn't sign up for any of this. No one told me my marks were strong as hell. Strong and fast. Taken down in less than thirty seconds. By a woman! That's never happened to me before. Of course, most of my jobs are little things. Picking someone's*

*pocket, trashing stores who refuse to pay for protection, stealing a few rides, selling dope to whoever has the cash and a few women who didn't. Face to face confrontations are not my thing. Somehow, I have to salvage something out of this mess—and save my neck while I'm at it.*

He watched Alyssa fight a smile as she read his thoughts. “There is no way I wouldn’t recognize this guy’s scent. He threw a cinder block through my store the other day. In fact, my store’s been broken into several times over the last few months and his scent is always there. He isn’t the only one messing with me, but he’s always a participant.”

Blake pulled the thug’s hair back, forcing him to look into his eyes. “Better answer the lady. Who are you?” Blake saw the man shake. He was near breaking. Just a little more pressure and he should crack. He didn’t mind playing *bad cop* right now, it was actually a pleasure. This creep had no right to mess with Alyssa. He deserved a whole hell of a lot worse than a good scare.

The mugger’s voice began to quake. “I can’t tell you. I’m a dead man if I do.”

“Well now, that’s a problem, because you’re a dead man if you *don’t*,” threatened Blake.

“Alright. Alright,” he cried. “Just don’t kill me.”

“That depends on you now, doesn’t it?” Alyssa stressed her words.

“My name’s Li...Lionel,” he stammered.

Blake flashed a grin. Without even being told what to do, Alyssa played right along. God, what a woman. “Now was that so hard Lionel?” he asked.

“You let me go, I’ll tell you whatever you want,” Lionel whispered.

Alyssa and Blake heard the tremor in his voice, smelled the man’s fear. Their eyes met over the top of Lionel’s head. It was

obvious to them that Lionel was telling the truth.

Alyssa let go of Lionel's arm. There was no need to continue holding him. He wasn't going anywhere any time soon.

Blake moved in front of the beaten man and began to throw questions at Lionel. "Who hired you to follow us?" demanded Blake.

"If I tell you that man, I'm dead," croaked Lionel.

"Tell you what," Blake began, "You tell me what I want to know and we'll give you enough cash so that you can make your escape. This should be an easy call for you. Maybe you could go to Mexico. Live on the beach. Hell, live anywhere other than the Jersey Shore."

"Her name is Monica Delano."

Blake didn't know who was more surprised, he or Alyssa. He'd never imagined a woman was at the bottom of everything happening to her.

"You're telling me a woman has you doing this," confirmed Blake.

"Hell, man, she's not no ordinary woman. No one crosses her, not if they're smart."

"Do you know why Alyssa has been targeted this way?" asked Blake.

"Hell no, I don't ask no questions. I just do the job I'm told to do and mind my own business."

"So you have no idea why this is happening?"

"I told ya, man, I keep to my own business, it's safer that way."

Blake knew he was telling the truth. It was in his voice, in the way his eyes grew round with fright, the putrid smell of fear wafting from his skin.

"Why were you following us this afternoon?" asked Alyssa

"I was told to make it look like a mugging. The job was to get

this guy's ID. The boss, well, she wanted to know who the man was that was hanging around your shop this morning. I just did what I was supposed to do. She didn't tell me you guys knew kung-fu or whatever the hell ya call it."

"Don't pout. If you'd managed to harm either one of us you'd be dead right now," promised Blake. "Now is there anything else you should tell us?"

"Only that Ms. Delano, she has something big planned for this lady's store."

"You don't know what it is?" asked Alyssa

"No way, lady, like I said before, it ain't none of my business."

Blake pulled a wad of bills from his pocket and held it out to Lionel. "Here you go. If I even think for one second that you haven't told the truth or that you're back in town, I'll carry out my threats. Don't make me do that."

"No, man, you won't see me again," he stammered, taking the money. Lionel scrambled to his feet and backed away from the pair, anxious to take his leave. He backed up a few more steps before he turned around and ran out of the alley, holding his injured arm.

Blake watched the man run away, then turned to Alyssa. "Looks like there are some things you should have told me," said Blake.

"It didn't come up. Besides, when have I had time to tell you? My problems are nothing compared to yours."

"You could have told me over lunch."

"Well, you know now," Alyssa snapped, her voice as icy as an arctic cold front.

Blake let her attitude pass without comment. "I'm glad we already discussed you coming with me. There's no way I'll leave you alone now. Whether you'd admit it or not, you need me."

“Don’t sound so smug.”

Blake laughed and pulled Alyssa beneath his arm, squeezing her just a little bit before letting her go. “Come on,” he suggested. “Let’s get back to your shop. Sebastian should be here any time now and you can fill me in on exactly what’s been going on here.”

Alyssa sighed, then slowly nodded.

She must have known there was no way he was going to drop the subject. Smart woman. The walk back to the shop took only a few minutes. Both were lost in their own thoughts, comfortable with the silence between them. Blake was distraught about his mother and unnerved about what had been happening to Alyssa. If he didn’t know better he could almost believe that both incidences, though seemingly random, were more than a coincidence—but that just had to be his overactive imagination talking. He hadn’t even known Alyssa before today.

\* \* \* \*

Alyssa worried about Blake’s mother, remembering all too well her own history and how it felt to lose her mother and father to monsters. The fact some unknown woman was targeting her didn’t even bother her. The way she figured it, if someone meant to harm her, more would have been done than petty vandalism.

With that in mind, Alyssa breathed a sigh of relief. Everything would be all right. They’d find out what happened to Blake’s mother, then they’d plan their future together.

Sebastian was just easing out of the Kia Sephia he’d obviously rented when Alyssa and Blake approached her shop. Alyssa was struck by the size of Blake’s friend. He looked like a linebacker. His chest was wide, his arms huge and his height had to be well over six feet. With sandy blond hair and sapphire blue eyes and

in his early thirties by the looks of him, Alyssa figured he was fast approaching the age in which the *Loup-garou* men starting feeling the need to find their mate and start families.

Until he found his own mate, it was going to get harder and harder for Sebastian to be around mated pairs. His loneliness would spread through every cell, until the only thing he could focus on was the need to find her. The need wiped every other thought from his mind. His every instinct would be to procreate. When he did finally find her, he wouldn't stop until he claimed her and made her his in every sense of the word. It was truly a dangerous time for their males. If they waited too long to mate, males of their species could lose their Humanity, become animals and truly become the Were-wolves of legend.

Blake approached his friend, held out his hand in greeting. "It's good to see you, Sebastian," he said.

Sebastian returned the handshake and then turned his gaze to her. Even from a distance, she knew he was of her species. He had strikingly good looks and moved with athletic grace. Of course, most of their kind did. The *Loup-garou* possessed an innate sense of balance, whether walking or running they did so with grace. She'd been told more than once that she appeared to glide as she moved.

Noticing Sebastian's attention focused on her, she sensed Blake bristle. Jealousy was common amongst the *Loup-garou*, especially when those who had not yet mated were in the vicinity. Until Blake had claimed her body and recited the mating vows, he would probably be jealous of anyone paying too much attention to her.

Blake moved closer to her, almost as if his need to feel her near him was paramount. He wrapped his arms around her waist, pulled her against his chest and as far out of Sebastian's reach as possible. "This is my mate, Alyssa. This is her place."

Alyssa pressed herself against Blake's chest, giving him the connection she knew he needed. Although she knew how possessive their people were, this was the first time she'd seen it up close. Sensing her need for space, Blake eventually released his hold on her.

She knew Blake was dealing with jealousy. The fact that he'd let her loose even when his instincts were clamoring at him not to, showed that he trusted their fledgling relationship. She couldn't resist grinning up at him.

Sebastian, smart wolf that he was, didn't approach her at all. "Nice to meet you, Alyssa," he said, before returning his attention to Blake.

Although caught unaware when Sebastian pulled him into a heartfelt hug, Blake returned the embrace, then stepped away.

"So," said Sebastian, "who's going to tell me what's going on? Sam wasn't all that informative about what I was to do here."

Blake placed a kiss on her forehead before giving his full attention to Sebastian. "Come inside and we'll tell you all we know."

Rather than bring Sebastian down to the hidden basement, the threesome headed up the stairs to Alyssa's apartment. After unlocking the door, Alyssa ushered them into her living room, flipped the switch by the door, and flooded the room with light. "Have a seat you two," she called as she headed into the kitchen. "Either of you want coffee? Or I have Coke in the fridge," she offered.

"I'll take a coke please," said Blake.

"Why not? Me, too," added Sebastian.

Carrying three Cokes into the living room, Alyssa seated herself next to Blake on the sofa. She watched, amused as Sebastian sat in the recliner, his hands clasped in front of him, his body poised on the edge of his seat as though on the verge of

running off.

After looking from Blake to Alyssa and back again, Sebastian cleared his throat. "So tell me, what's going on? All I know is it involves your mother, Blake, beyond that, I wasn't given any other information."

"That's my fault," said Blake. "I was in shock when I spoke to Sam and didn't give him many details. I just told him I needed you and here you are."

"So what's up?" asked Sebastian. "What do you need me for?"

"Originally, I asked you here because we need someone in the store at all times. Since Alyssa is going with me to help find my mother, I need someone to stand in here."

"Selling jewelry?" Sebastian sounded as if he'd rather be boiled alive than work the jewelry counter.

Blake chuckled. "No. Maybe I should show you why." Turning toward her, he took Alyssa's hand in his and gave it a slight squeeze. "You don't think they'll mind visitors, do you?" he asked her.

"They should still be up. I try not to violate their privacy, but I think they'll understand the need this time. I'm sure it would be alright."

"We're right behind you."

At Alyssa's nod, Blake and Sebastian followed Alyssa downstairs to her workroom. Opening the hidden latch, she led the men to the room below.

The Clancy's were eating dinner when the threesome entered the chamber.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," apologized Alyssa. "But it's important."

"That's okay. Let's move over to the sofa and let the children eat."

"Good idea," Alyssa whispered. She should have known



better than to approach them when their children were nearby. She could kick herself for forgetting that little ears heard everything, whether you wanted them to or not.

Blake's voice whispered through her mind. *Like you told me, baby, stop beating yourself up.*

Alyssa smiled. It felt so right when Blake spoke using their mental connection. It made her feel cared for, cherished as though what she felt was of paramount importance, something intimate that shouldn't be shared with those around them. She could sure get used to this method of communicating with Blake. *I'll try*, she answered back.

Sebastian circled the room, his eyes intent, taking in every detail, from the shelves that held food and water to the many books lining the walls. "What is this place?" he asked.

"It's the reason you're here," said Blake. "You're really not going to believe it. You tell him, Rodney."

Pride in her foster parent's accomplishments flowed through Alyssa as Rodney's thoughts filled her mind, unbidden. Rodney was more than happy to tell the visitor.

*Everyone should know of the bravery, courage, and commitment it must take to run such a place as this.*

Blushing at her unwitting intrusion, Alyssa put up a mind block in an attempt to leave the man his privacy.

"We're here awaiting passports so we can get out of the country."

Turning toward her, Sebastian asked, "What does he mean?"

"You know how during the Civil War the slaves were freed and sent through the Underground Railroad to safety? That's precisely what this is, only instead of ensuring the safety of escaping slaves, the railroad helps our people reach safety. I take in families on the run, those that have been hunted down, and I arrange for new identification and enough cash for them to start

new somewhere else. Every family writes of their history in those journals over there so we have a record of all who pass through here," she said, pointing to the shelves against the north wall. "We'll leave you alone now so you can finish your dinner. Sorry to disturb you," she said.

"Don't mention it," said Rodney.

The three turned and headed back up the stairs to Alyssa's workroom, silently, each lost in their own thoughts.

"Amazing," Sebastian finally muttered. "A living history of those who've managed to escape the Vampire." He hesitated for a minute. "You need me here in case others show up, don't you?"

"Exactly."

Sebastian turned toward Blake. "So is this all of it?"

"No, unfortunately. Tonight we found out some disturbing news. For the last few months, the store has been vandalized on a pretty regular basis. Windows broken, that sort of thing. Always little things. You know the type of things gang members commonly do. According to the man that tried to mug us tonight, a woman by the name of Monica Delano is targeting Alyssa. We've no idea why. And according to Lionel, she has something big planned for Alyssa."

"Lionel?" asked Sebastian.

"The guy from earlier," added Alyssa. "That's all he would tell us."

"Anyway," interrupted Blake. "You need to keep your eyes open."

"Will do. By the way," asked Sebastian, "what brought you here to begin with? Were you following up on a case?"

"You could say that. I heard rumors about the railroad. Thought I'd check it out. I was going to read through the journals to see if there is any reference to Sam's sister in the books."

"You could always read through them, Sebastian," added Alyssa. "It might give you something to do."

"I just might."

She thought it could be just the distraction he needed, something to thwart the loneliness he felt cramping his soul. She knew he needed to focus on something other than his need to find a mate. "I have a list of my contacts for the other stops written down in the safe," continued Alyssa. She pulled a scrap of paper from her jeans pocket and said, "Here's the combination."

"If you need anything you can give me a call on my cell phone," offered Blake. "You know the number."

"Any other questions?" asked Alyssa.

"Not that I can think of." Sebastian pulled them both into an embrace and then stepped back. "Keep safe, and don't worry, Alyssa," said Sebastian. "I'll keep everything up and running here while you're gone."

With that assurance, Blake and Alyssa headed out into the night, confident that they'd left things in good hands.

## Chapter Six

They rode in companionable silence for over an hour when Alyssa turned to face Blake. “So what’s the plan?” she asked.

Blake glanced over at her, then returned his attention to the road ahead of him. “What do you mean?”

“The plan. You have one, don’t you?”

“Not yet,” he quipped, “but I’ll have one before we get to California.”

“California? Are you telling me that we have to take a plane all the way to California?”

Blake sighed. “Yes.” He heard the strain in her voice. “Is that a problem?” he asked.

“Why would you think that?” she asked in a voice heavy with sarcasm. “Crap. How was she going to get on that plane? She’d been so focused on Blake’s problems that she hadn’t thought of *how* they would get to California.

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid to fly?” asked Blake.

“Ok, I won’t tell you.”

Blake looked as if he was swallowing a chuckle that threatened to bubble to the surface. He probably couldn’t believe it. She could face down a criminal in the streets, never losing her cool, but the prospect of getting on a plane sent her into a panic.

"I'm sorry. I should have told you before we left."

Alyssa sighed. It wasn't Blake's fault. It's not as though he could have known she and planes didn't mix. The last time she flew anywhere, she spent the entire flight with her teeth clenched, hands white-knuckled, clutching the armrests, praying to every deity she could imagine for a smooth landing.

"I assume you called for the tickets while I was out this afternoon?"

Blake looked over at her. "I didn't want to waste time. My mother's in the hands of a monster."

Alyssa felt ashamed. Here she was worrying about a plane ride while Blake had much worse on his mind. She should have been more considerate. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "You must be terrified."

"I know in my heart that we're going to find her. It's wondering about what shape she'll be in when we do that bothers me."

Alyssa felt his fear, smelled it. As a child, she lost her mother. She had firsthand knowledge of how hard it was to lose a loved-one, especially to a violent end. Feeling the need to comfort him, she reached for his hand, lacing their fingers together.

They fell into silence, each fearing they were already too late.

Alyssa squeezed Blake's hand, sending him warmth and compassion. Using their telepathic bond, she whispered, *We will find her, Blake. That's a promise.*

He glanced over at her. He needed her right now and she planned to be the strength he needed to get through this.

\* \* \* \*

Blake's emotions swam in a chaotic whirl—pleased, joyful even, at finding Alyssa, yet saddened that it was at a time where he

couldn't focus all of his attention on her as she deserved. Then and there, he vowed to himself that when all this was over, he would lavish her with attention, until she knew all the way to her bones they were meant to be together.

Once again, they lapsed into silence, this time content with being together, no matter what the future held.

Blake saw the Manhattan skyline sparkle in the distance. The view of New York at night always filled him with awe. With its millions of Humans of every race and nationality, he blended in, hiding in plain sight. He liked walking the streets, meeting new people. His job as a Private Investigator-Security Consultant kept him busy and gave him the contacts he needed to search for others of his kind.

Blake rolled down his window, inhaled the crisp evening air, before stealing a peek at Alyssa. She was sound asleep, her head against the window, her hand tucked beneath her chin. She looked like an angel, sitting there. His hands itched with the need to reach out and stroke her cheek, to run his fingers through her silky hair. But she was resting peacefully and who knew when they'd next get any kind of meaningful sleep.

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel as his thoughts turned to his mother. He prayed they would find her alive and unharmed. The chances of that happening were slim to none. Hell, he didn't even know what manner of creature had her, whether it was Vampire, Were-wolf or Human. In silence, he vowed to himself, he would damn well find her and whoever or whatever took her would learn just how pissed a Were-wolf could get.

In the passenger seat, Alyssa began to stir. She'd be awake soon. Then they could figure out what to do next.

Alyssa was slow to open her eyes, but her thoughts immediately sought him out through their bond. *Are we going*

*straight to the airport?*

By speaking to him using telepathy, he could actually feel her arousal as though it were his own. In her own defense though, Blake didn't think she knew about the bond becoming stronger with the mind link. He knew the only other people she'd spoken to this way were her parents when she was a child.

Blake felt her discomfort. To know that someone close to him knew what he thought and felt was a little unnerving, but if it meant feeling whole and alive for the first time since he reached puberty, then he'd damn well get used to it. 'Cause he damn sure wasn't giving her up. "No, we're going to stop at my apartment first." Blake swung the car into the right lane and whipped into the parking garage, missing the toll bar by an inch. Blake looked up.

Leroy, the garage attendant shook his head. "Close again, Mr. Donovan."

"Better luck next time, Leroy."

"What was that all about?" Alyssa asked.

Blake looked into Alyssa's eyes and smirked. "Just a dare, no big deal." Then he smiled, trying to make it a sexy and dangerous, was-it-there-or-wasn't-it kind of smile. "I have a couple of phone calls to make and clothes to pack. We'll only be here a few minutes." He stepped out of the car and headed toward the parking garage elevator.

\* \* \* \*

Eager to see Blake's apartment, Alyssa raced to catch up with him. "What floor do you live on?"

"Aren't you just full of questions this evening?"

There was no sting to Blake's words, so she didn't fear that she'd overstepped her bounds. She caught up with him just as he

eased into the elevator. Blake grabbed her hand and reached for the other so that she had no choice but to look at him. Still she refused to meet his eyes and Blake chuckled.

“Alyssa, baby, there is no way you will ever overstep anything. You are my true mate and I’ll be damned if you can’t say whatever you wanted to me.”

Alyssa peeked at him from beneath her lashes. He was smiling and if she had to bet money, she’d bet that he wouldn’t lie to her, not on purpose anyway. There was so much hope inside her heart. It fluttered within her with golden wings. Was she brave enough to trust Blake completely? *Damn right I am. But take your time. There’s no rush to get to know him. You have the rest of your lives for that. For now, there are more important things than the relationship you’re starting with him,* she thought to herself. At least while she was sleeping she hadn’t thought about getting on the airplane. Now, terror filled her mind. Maybe they should take the train. Or better yet, drive. She had to get a grip on herself. That would take too long. She’d just have to sleep on the flight. “Do you have sleeping pills?”

“Huh? Do I have sleeping pills? Is that what you asked?”

Alyssa blushed. She had a nasty habit of jumping from subject to subject without warning. It was something more than one person had pointed out to her. “I was just thinking since plane rides terrify me, maybe you had something on hand that will help me sleep through it.”

“Afraid I don’t. But we can stop at the drugstore and get some.”

“What time is our flight?”

“It’s 8:30 right now and our plane takes off at 10:45.”

“Then there isn’t time to stop, not with the way airport security has tightened up since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks.” Alyssa tried to smile, to act as if flying was *no big deal*, but she



couldn't. She could not get past the terror lodged in her throat and she seriously doubted a good scream would help matters. How was she going to handle being on a plane for so many hours, especially if she remained awake the whole time?

Alyssa was so upset about the flight to come, she hadn't even realized that they'd reached Blake's apartment until he stopped to pick up a newspaper dropped in front of his door. She needed to think about something else, anything else. She cleared her throat as she searched her mind for something to talk about.

"Is this your apartment?" she asked. Oh jeez. Could she get any lamer? Of course, it was his apartment. He wouldn't just walk into a stranger's house and with a key to boot. Alyssa shook her head, disgusted with herself. *I may as well have loser tattooed across my forehead.* The only thing to do now was brave it out.

\* \* \* \*

Blake knew Alyssa was on edge, he could see it in the tension of her shoulders, in her rigid walk, the hint of red on her cheeks. She needed to calm down and he needed to know why this trip was freaking her out. There had to be something more than just a fear of flying to put her in a tailspin. To alter her personality so drastically, it had to be something more, something devastating.

Blake reached for Alyssa's hand and pulled her into the foyer, locking the door behind them. He wished they didn't have a plane to catch. Now that he had Alyssa in his home, he was reluctant to leave it. He'd never brought a woman to his apartment before and he had to admit, at least to himself, that it felt like the right decision as though inside he'd always known that only one woman belonged here with him. It's why he'd never hired a housekeeper or interior designer. This apartment was a work of love, designed and decorated with his mate in mind.

He'd just never thought of it as such before now.

"Make yourself at home while I get my things together and make those calls I told you about." Almost immediately, the enormous wall of built-in bookcases drew Alyssa's attention. He saw her move over to them, her eyes huge and filled with unreserved joy. He had books of every genre imaginable, from Shakespearean classics to paperback romance novels filling the shelves. The volumes ranged from the history of Winston Churchill, to an unauthorized biography of Garth Brooks. She could get lost in the texts for hours without going outside these four walls.

As if on impulse he saw her reach up and grab one of the romance novels, then take a seat in the overstuffed recliner. Maybe getting lost among the words would keep her mind off her other troubles, at least for a little while.

After she settled, he walked to his bedroom and tossed a few shirts and jeans into his travel bag. He didn't need to take much with him. The real reason he needed to stop at the apartment was to pick up some things from his wall safe. There was plenty of cash in there and they would need it.

Shoving everything he needed into his bag, Blake peeked in on Alyssa, then stepped into his office. He sat down at his desk and picked up the phone. What he was about to do would probably come back to bite him on the ass, but he didn't get to be the best in the business by second-guessing his instincts. The call had to be made. Blake sighed, picked up the phone and dialed the number he swore he'd never use again.

The phone was answered on the first ring. "Jim Pacer."

"Hi, Jimmy. I see you're still working banker's hours."

"Donavan, is that you? What the hell? Didn't think I'd ever hear from you again. What's it been? Five years now. As a matter of fact, I believe you said you'd never call this number again.

Thought you were through with shadow work.”

“I am. Look, Jimmy, I have a problem and you still owe me for hauling your sorry ass out of that gunfight in Mexico.”

“Shit, man. It must be important if you’re using blackmail to get your way. You hate having to manipulate the situation. It was the main reason you quit the agency, that and all the killing we do.”

“Well, I need Intel and you’re the man in the know, at least you used to be.”

Pacer chuckled. “Still am, man. Still am. So enough with the small talk already, whatcha need?”

Blake smiled. Pacer was all business now. Always eager to play the game. Blake was glad to be out of it. Three years as a government-sanctioned assassin was enough for him. Too much, really. He should have gotten out sooner than he did, before cynicism stole his ideals. “I need you to run two names. I need deep background on both of them. First name is Monica Delano. She’s running a protection racket as far as I know. I want to know what else she’s doing, and who she’s doing it with. Second name, Alyssa Maguire. She’s a jeweler. You can call my cell phone when you have the Intel.”

“Any background on the second name. This Alyssa Maguire woman?”

“That’s your job. I need the intel yesterday, Big Jim.”

“You’ve got it. So when you coming back into the fold, man.”

“I’m not. I’m out Jimmy and I’m going to stay that way.”

“You know, if the brass found out I’m doing this for you, I could get my ass canned for not insisting you go through proper channels. They want you back man. They want you bad.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

“In other words, mind my own business. I hear ya, Blake. I hear ya. I’ll get you that info, soon as I get a chance to run it.

Might be a couple of hours.”

“Do what you can,” Blake said, then hung up the phone and looked out the window. Had he done the right thing? Deep down he knew Alyssa wouldn’t betray him, that she was exactly what she appeared to be. Still, he’d stayed alive as long as he had by covering his ass in every direction. It was who he was. He just hoped Alyssa would understand. Blake shrugged off his fears. If they were going to make that flight, they better leave for the airport now. But first, he had to make another call. “Yeah?”

“Ditch, this is Donavon. I’ve got a job for you. The pays good.”

“You know me, so long as the money’s right, I can get what ya need.”

“I need a 9mm, lots of ammo and a car outside the airport in San Francisco.”

“You goin’ for flash or do ya want to blend in?”

“Surprise me. Look, I need it yesterday. My flight lands around two in the morning. Where do you want to do the drop?”

“Same place as last time, man. Catch ya later.”

“Yeah, later.” Blake put the phone back on the cradle and took his cell phone out of his pocket and plugged it into charge. Sitting back in his seat, he sighed. It was going to be a long night. He rolled his head from side to side, trying to get the kinks out, but the tension in his neck and shoulders apparently intended to stay there. Picking up his bag, he headed into the living room. Engrossed in the paperback, Alyssa didn’t notice when he came into the room. Or so he thought.

“Did you make those calls you needed to?” she asked, startling him.

“Sure did. Everything’s taken care of.” Blake took a deep breath, and after taking a long look at Alyssa, he had to laugh. When he left her to make his call, she’d been sitting in his chair,

her posture stiff and her feet planted firmly on the ground. Not a very comfortable position in his opinion. Now she sat with her chin on her knees, socks and shoes tossed on the floor and a tendril of hair held firmly between her lips. What a picture she made.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m just happy to see you in my chair.”

“Hmmm...I’m ready when you are.”

Blake lowered his head to hide his smile. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Huh?”

“Your shoes, you’re not wearing them.”

Alyssa looked down at her feet and blushed. “Umm...well.” She cleared her throat. “Just give me a sec and we can go.”

With embarrassment obviously prodding her into action, Alyssa made quick work of donning her socks and shoes. It wasn’t until they were in the car and heading toward JFK that her curiosity got the better of her.

“So what calls did you have to make?”

Blake took a quick peek at Alyssa. Did she suspect he was hiding something? How much should he tell her?

“Well?”

“I made sure there was a car waiting for us, as well as a firearm.”

“Isn’t that illegal?”

Blake smirked. “Of course it is, but I doubt whoever attacked that little girl was thinking about legalities.”

Alyssa lowered her head, her thoughts turned inward.

Blake reached out and lifted her chin, forcing her to meet his eyes. “There’s no reason to be embarrassed, none at all. Understand?” He wasn’t sure she believed him, but she was desperate to change the subject.

“So who else did you call?”

Blake hesitated, unsure how much to reveal. He didn't want to start their relationship with lies. With that in mind, he answered Alyssa's question. And if she wanted specifics, he'd tell her that, too, no matter the consequences. He just hoped they wouldn't be too high. “Someone I used to work with. I have him doing some background checks.”

“Who are you investigating?”

Blake put on his turn signal, changed lanes, all the while pretending he hadn't heard the question. How much to reveal, he didn't know. “Well, Monica Delano, for one.”

Alyssa turned in her seat so that she was facing him. “Because of what the mugger said?”

“Yes. We need to find out what she's up to. Why harassing you is her objective and why my arriving on the scene managed to spook her.”

“Who else is your friend investigating?”

“What's that?”

“You said Monica Delano was one person, who else?”

Blake hesitated, unsure of exactly how to explain why he felt the need to dig into her past. Blake sighed. “You.”

“What?”

“I have Jimmy looking into your background as well.”

Alyssa looked stunned. Then she went way beyond that straight to pissed. Beyond pissed even. She looked like she wanted to rip Blake's heart right out of his chest. “You better have a damn good explanation or I'm out of here,” she snarled.

Blake believed her. Already her hand was on the door handle as though she'd rather jump from a moving car than be in his presence one second more than necessary. After checking for traffic, Blake pulled over to the side of the road. Cars honked and swerved behind him, their drivers furious at the sudden

move. Blake was oblivious to it. His mind focused on the best way to explain.

“Well?”

Blake turned in his seat, facing her. “Look. It wasn’t personal.”

“Of course it’s personal,” she scoffed. “It’s my life you’re looking into.”

Blake gritted his teeth. She wasn’t making it easy on him to explain. Still, who would want easy in a relationship? Easy would get boring pretty quickly. “You’re right. It is your life.”

“Then why?”

Blake felt the hurt in her words. He’d never meant to cause her any kind of pain though he’d known it was a possibility when he made the call and initiated the investigation. “Look there has to be a reason this Delano lady is after you. Maybe it’s something in your past or maybe it’s not. But we need to know.”

“And that’s the only reason you have that man looking into my past.”

“Mostly.”

“What do you mean?”

Her voice was rising again, but he knew at this point she didn’t give a flying damn. It didn’t take a genius to know he was getting deeper and deeper into trouble with every word out of his mouth, but he wouldn’t lie to her. She was his mate and he wouldn’t start their relationship based on a growing pile of little white lies. “I’m curious, okay? You lead a remarkable life. I want to know as much about you as I can. You’re my mate. I have that right.”

That surprised her. “All you had to do was ask. I would have told you anything you wanted to know.”

Blake sighed. He could tell she was still upset with him. All he could do now was apologize. “I’m sorry. I should have told you

what I planned. And you're right, I should have asked you about your past, not gone straight to a stranger to tell me. I apologize."

Alyssa turned her face away. She was looking everywhere except at him before finally glancing at the clock on the front of the radio. It was just after nine. "It's time to get going or we'll never make it through security."

Blake hesitated, unsure of where he stood. Was she still angry with him? He just couldn't tell. At least one good thing came out of their conversation, he thought. Alyssa had been so angry that he doubted she'd thought at all about the upcoming flight. After peeking in his rearview mirror to avoid oncoming vehicles, he eased back on to the road and headed for the airport.



## Chapter Seven

Minutes later, Blake and Alyssa pulled into JFK's short-term parking lot. Alyssa hadn't spoken since their argument. Blake assumed she'd been seething over his earlier conduct and he wouldn't blame her if that were the case either.

When he turned toward her, he noticed beads of sweat gathered along her brow. Her teeth were chattering as though it were the dead of winter rather than a pleasant late-summer evening. The horror on her face told him exactly how frantic she felt. Her eyes glowed like two emeralds against her alabaster skin, staring at nothing but seeing entirely too much. It was obvious she was scared out of her mind. Blake worried that even speaking above a whisper right now would force her to flee, like a fox that races toward his burrow when being chased by hungry hounds on the hunt.

Slowly, he reached for one of her fisted hands and carefully unfolded her fingers one at a time until he could weave their fingers together. He wasn't even sure if she knew he sat beside her, but he couldn't leave her like this. There had to be something he could do. "Alyssa, honey," he whispered. "Talk to me. Tell me what I can do for you, baby." Blake gently stroked her hair as though she were a child in desperate need of soothing while squeezing her other hand in his, hoping for a

response—any response at all.

Her unnatural silence terrified him. He'd had no idea when she confessed her fear of flying that it debilitated her to this extent. How would he find the heart to get her on that plane, especially in her current condition? Maybe if he reached for her telepathically. *Alyssa, honey,* he called to her. *I need you to come back to me now. I can't help you if you don't talk to me, Alyssa. Please, honey. Look, I was a jerk. But I need to know you're okay.*

Perhaps the mental plea could reach through her paralysis. After what seemed like ages, Alyssa turned her head toward Blake and squeezed his fingers. He sighed, torn between thankfulness at her response and anger that she hadn't told him her fear would make her nearly catatonic. Anger won. "Dammit! Why didn't you tell me just how difficult this would be for you?"

It took a minute for Alyssa to find her voice, but when she did, he heard her exasperation loud and clear. "Isn't that obvious?" She didn't give him a chance to respond before continuing. "Because you would have left me behind, that's why."

"Damn straight. If I'd known, I'd have come by myself. I've half a mind to turn this damn car around right now and take you home. I can catch a flight in the morning if I have to." Blake turned his head, not wanting Alyssa to see his worry for her or the need he felt to have her by his side. He needed to do what he thought best for her.

Alyssa reached for Blake's shoulder, forcing him to look her in the eye. "I'm going with you. And that's final," she proclaimed.

When he would have argued, Alyssa placed her finger against his lips. Leave her. Take her. Leave her. Take her. Blake looked into Alyssa's eyes and knew he wouldn't be going anywhere without her. How was a man supposed to say no when his woman could plead her case so eloquently without uttering a

single word? “Fine, but before you start gloating about your ability to twist me around your little finger, there’s a condition.”

“Sure. What’s the condition?”

“I want to know why you’re terrified of flying.” By the look on her face, she hadn’t expected him to demand that from her, but she knew he deserved an explanation.

“Okay. I’ll tell you everything, but first we need to go check in. We might not make it through security on time as it is.”

He sensed she hated her fear, perhaps thought it made her seem weak. That couldn’t be farther from the truth, in his eyes.

“When we get on the plane, I’ll tell you everything I promise. It’s just going to take a while and I want to tell the story all at once. Okay?”

Blake didn’t want to wait until they were on the plane for her explanation, but that was just his impatience talking, not a lack of trust in her word. “Sounds like a plan. Hey, did I mention we’re flying first class?”

Alyssa grinned. “Really? Will they pour us Champagne and everything like you see in the movies? And bring us warm towels for our faces?”

“They sure will.”

“Cool.” Just like that, the fright was gone, like a child offered a treat after a small hurt in reward for sitting bravely while being doctored up. Shaking his head, Blake followed Alyssa into the airport terminal.

Knowing time grew short, Alyssa and Blake went right to the gate to report in, bypassing luggage check in altogether.

Of course, if they were lucky, then they’d get to experience airport security giving them a full body search. Gone were the days when weapons and drugs were easily smuggled aboard a plane.

They were a single step from boarding the plane when her

panic set in again. Blake saw her body stiffen and her hands and knees start to quake. Her eyes grew as wide and round as his grandmother's china saucers and her teeth clenched and ground together.

Blake didn't know any other way to soothe her, not in front of so many people waiting to board the plane. Perhaps he could sooth her with his touch, reach her like he did in the car. He cautiously reached for Alyssa's clasped hands and pulled her under his arm so that she rested against his chest and could hear his heartbeat. When her breathing eased a bit, he trailed his fingers through her hair, slowing petting her in the hope it might continue to give her some feeling of safety within his arms as they stepped onto the plane.

Within minutes they were ushered to their seats in first class and offered blankets and pillows for their comfort. Once settled comfortably, Blake once again reached for her hand. She jerked at his touch, but didn't pull away. He took that as a sign that even though she might be afraid of flying, she wasn't afraid of him. Besides, for hours he'd been imagining what it would feel like to sink his fingers in her hair, to have the silken tresses wrapped around his fist. It was still as silky and shiny as he remembered. He could kiss her now. He knew it. She wouldn't hesitate, but he didn't want to rush her. Their flight would take off in another minute—too quickly for him to kiss her as he truly wanted.

As if the pilot read his thoughts, the plane slowly taxied out onto to the runaway. Immediately, Alyssa grabbed the armrests of her seat, her knuckles bleached white, evidence of the strength of her grip. Reaching over, he took her right hand in his, "You can hold on to me, honey."

She raised her eyes to his. If she knew anything about him so far, he hoped she knew he said what he meant and he meant what he said. He'd do his best to keep any promise he made. It

wouldn't matter whom he made that promise to, only that it would be kept. But as her mate, a promise to Alyssa would never be broken if he could help it.

Gripping Blake's hand, she turned to him, her eyes full of misery and defiance. "I want you to kiss me."

"What?" She couldn't possibly have said what he thought she had.

"I want you to kiss me. Now," she demanded.

He had no idea what she intended, but who was he to argue? "How do you want it? Slow and sweet, or hard and hot?"

"All of the above. Just make it mind-numbing."

Blake groaned. Was she trying to kill him? They were on an airplane for Christ's sake. Then he got it. That was the whole point. He probably should have been offended that she planned to use him in such a manner, but since it worked perfectly with his own plan to seduce her at the earliest possible opportunity, who was he to complain.

"Come here," he growled and firmly pulled her into his arms. He didn't give her a chance to change her mind, before he dived into her mouth, sparring with her tongue in a sensual dance of give and take. She tasted of passion and heat, lust and need and he couldn't get enough of her.

Blake had to control the kiss. They were going so fast. Alyssa was practically in his lap. When they finally did make love, they were going to combust. Reluctantly, Blake ended the kiss, but was unable to stop touching her. His hands ran up and down her back, caressed her arms and stroked her hair. He'd intended only to sooth her fears, but had instead inflamed her desire for him. That knowledge was a powerful thing to Blake—to know that her desire for him was as strong as his need of her worked as an aphrodisiac, not that he needed one. Her kisses were enough to tempt a Buddhist monk to stray from the path of

enlightenment.

Deeply immersed in her mind, Blake felt everything Alyssa did. She was lost, could do nothing but feel. Her heart was in her throat, pounding so hard she wouldn't be surprised if they could hear it in the seat behind them. Her hands itched with the need to run them over his arms, down his back, to explore his skin with her sensitive fingers. She wanted to feel him quiver beneath her hands, begging her to take him, to claim him as her mate.

"God, you're killing me. You know that don't you, Alyssa?"

"Not any more than you are me."

"How about giving me a rain check on where this is going?" After checking to make sure no one was looking, Blake reached down and made sure his arousal wasn't obvious.

Alyssa's lips twitched as she valiantly tried not to chuckle, but he could feel her mirth through their bond and that made him happy despite his body's discomfort.

Now that the mood was lighter, Blake decided it might be the best time to ask her again about her fear of flying. Of course, it could blow up in his face and the trip might become twice as difficult for her. Blake cleared his throat. The coming conversation filled him with dread, but he knew it had to happen. So, taking a deep breath, Blake cleared his throat and turned to face her. "Alyssa?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Meeting his determined gaze, Alyssa knew the time had come for explanations. "You want to know why flying scares me?" she asked, already knowing the answer but wanting to hear it anyway.

"That's right."

She swallowed past the lump constricting her throat. It wasn't the easiest story for her to tell, but she knew Blake wouldn't push

her. Somehow that made it easier to tell him about her past. "Growing up, it was just my mom, dad and I. We had great times, the three of us. We were living in Arizona then, on a small compound with a couple of other families. The Vampire attacked one night, a vicious attack without any warning. Most of us escaped. My dad wasn't one of them."

When she paused, Blake urged her on. "What happened next?"

She swallowed back the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks, clenching her hands together as she tried to hold on to something through the telling. "Mom and I ran. We didn't even stop to pack any clothing, just emptied out the bank account, jumped on a bus and went into hiding. It wasn't long before the Vampire caught up with us. We were in the outskirts of New Orleans by then, and mom knew where we could find help and made me memorize the information."

"You're talking about the railroad, aren't you?"

Alyssa nodded. "Yes. I stayed with a Cajun family in the swamps for a few days. Then took the money we had left and hopped a bus that eventually led to the Jersey Shore where you found me. I was supposed to wait there until they could get me a passport and get me out of the country."

Blake reached over and placed his hand over her clenched ones.

"I was there a little over a week and then one day they told me that they were never able to have children, but if it was okay with me, would I like to stay with them as their little girl. I figured sure, why not. It wasn't as if I had any other family. They were just as good as any other family I would have been sent to."

"Were you lonely, growing up with an older couple the way you did?"

"No, not really. In their eyes, it didn't matter who my parents

were. I became their daughter and that's the way they always treated me, even before they asked me if I'd stay as their adopted daughter."

"So what happened that made you afraid of flying?"

Alyssa paused. Her eyes took on a haunted look as she thought back to the past, back to that summer she turned sixteen. Things could have been so different.

"If you need a break, that's okay. There's no rush, honey."

She hated him seeing her this way, her face probably as transparent as a ghost, eyes etched with sorrow. She was wringing her hands. She truly wished the pain wasn't so raw even after all these years, but she knew she had to tell him.

"Alyssa. You don't have to tell me any more honey. It hurts you too much."

"No, I need to tell you. I want to tell you."

"Would you like something to drink?"

With a tiny hint of a smile, she nodded.

"Great." Almost immediately after raising his hand for service, the flight attendant arrived.

"Hi, there. Welcome aboard. My name's Lily and I'll be taking care of you this evening. I see you have your blankets and pillows, what else can I get for you two?"

"Two glasses of Champagne, please."

This time the smile she gave him was a full and honest grin. "Thank you, Blake."

"My pleasure" he replied, reaching over to hold her hand in his again.

And it *was* his pleasure, she realized.

They sat there quietly, each occupied with their own thoughts as they savored their drinks.

All too soon, she'd be delving back into her past, but for now, she enjoyed the companionable warmth her hand in his gave her.



If only everyone could feel as content as she felt at this moment.

"You're looking relaxed," Blake observed.

"You're right. I do feel pretty mellow. I think I'm ready to tell you the rest of the story now." She mentally braced herself. Her tale was only going to get worse, the more she told.

Blake stared into her eyes, then nodded. "Go ahead then, baby."

"Anyway, everything was great and every year on the anniversary of the day I came to live with them, they would plan a surprise. Well, I was sixteen years old on the day I celebrated my sixth anniversary with them and I thought I could conquer the world without any effort at all."

"I think, that at sixteen, we all felt the same way," he said interrupting her.

Alyssa nodded, but her eyes were once again gazing into the distance. "Well, I wanted to take some flying lessons. I thought it'd be cool to have a pilot's license, you know? Be the only teenager who could fly a plane. Hell, everyone wants to feel like they can do something that no one else can. I was no exception."

Blake saw where this story was going. "What happened, Alyssa?" he whispered.

"It was my final qualifying flight. If I completed all the tasks the instructor demanded during the course of the flight, he'd sign my pilot's license. Everything went great and I passed without a single error. I literally was flying high at that point. The problem came when we tried to land. The landing gear had only deployed halfway when it froze. The instructor took over the controls since we were coming in for a hard emergency landing. I had no idea my parents stayed to see my final flight. Usually, they'd just drop me off and come back two hours later once the lesson ended."

Alyssa swallowed past the pain. She was choking on her grief. "I didn't see them. I didn't see the car sitting there next to the

runway. We just missed them, pulling the plane onto the grass less than three feet from their parked car. What if he hadn't been able to control the landing? They would have been killed, Blake, and it would have been my fault." Tears meandered down her cheeks.

"It was not your fault, Alyssa. Shit, happens. And blaming yourself is a waste of time. You're no guiltier than I am," he argued.

"They were watching me do something I loved, something I wanted so I'd feel superior to others and it nearly got them killed."

"Then they would have died knowing that you were happy. Let it rest at that."

"I haven't flown at all since then...except once, and that was to return home from college to attend their funerals after they were killed in a car accident."

"Then it's about time you flew again, don't you think?"

Blake continued to caress her hand with his. His eyes were full of compassion and silent understanding. He had no idea how much it meant for him to support her as he was. After giving him a shy but heartfelt smile, she squeezed his hand in return. "Thank you, Blake."

"There's nothing to thank me for. Listening to you is no hardship."

"You did more than that and you know it." Leaning forward, Alyssa placed a chaste kiss on his cheek, then whispered, "Thanks."

"You're welcome, honey. You look beat. Why don't you go ahead and take a nap. We'll be landing in a couple of hours."

Alyssa couldn't imagine actually sleeping on the plane, but maybe she could rest her eyes for just a minute. Five minutes later, she let sleep claim her, knowing in her heart Blake would

watch over her and keep her safe.

\* \* \* \*

By the time Blake and Alyssa got through baggage claim and headed toward the parking lot, it was nearly three in the morning, far too late to head to the compound. It would be far better to arrive there in the morning under the full light of day than show up in the middle of the night, exhausted. Besides that, Alyssa knew she couldn't handle anything more tonight. The flight had taken everything out of her. Her eyes felt sunken, her head throbbed with a tension headache and her body hung limp with fatigue.

"What do you think about searching for a room now instead of driving straight to the compound, Alyssa?"

Alyssa gave Blake a tired, but heartfelt sigh. "Oh, that sounds heavenly."

"There are several good hotels just down the road."

"So long as it has a tub that I can soak in, it'll be perfect." All she wanted was to slide into the hot water and let it work its magic on her sore body. You'd think she'd gone a few rounds in a boxing ring the way her muscles screamed at her.

"Great. We'll be there in no time. Now let's find that car I arranged for."

"How do you know where to look for it?"

"I have an arrangement. Whenever I need transportation from this airport, my associate parks it in the same spot every time. The key will be hidden in one of those magnetic boxes behind the left rear tire."

"Oh." She let a few seconds pass, then asked the question that had been bugging her since their argument earlier that

evening. "This guy you called...is what he does for you legal? I mean, you aren't breaking any laws, are you?" That question sounded stupid—even to her. They were Were-wolves. They hunted and killed Vampires and she was worried about whether they were driving a stolen car. "Forget I asked that. It doesn't really matter in the grand scheme of things."

"Of course it matters. We may not be Human, but we do have respect for Human laws, whenever possible anyway. To answer your question, he has a fleet of vehicles that he uses for stakeouts and such. Not to mention he registers all the weapons, which I buy from him...legally."

Alyssa blushed. It wasn't that she hadn't trusted Blake, but it was easy to jump to conclusions when it appeared so easy to get things like a car and gun with just a single phone call. "Oh. So this guy, he's a P.I., too?"

"Yeah. He was a cop in Los Angeles. Now he works mostly missing person cases. We worked on a case together when he was still on the force. Now, when I need something on the West Coast, he's the first man I call."

"I'm sorry. I should have trusted you more."

"Why should you? We don't know each other...yet."

"Still, I feel like I misjudged you."

"Whatever, no biggie. So you ready to go find our car and get to that hotel?"

"Oh yeah."

Blake picked up their two bags and headed for the nearest exit, Alyssa trailing right behind him.

Within minutes, they were on their way, giving Alyssa more than enough time to wonder just how many rooms they would be renting. Would Blake suggest two, or would she demand one? They knew they were mates. The only question left in her mind was when they were going to do something about it.

As exhausted as she was, Alyssa looked forward to being alone with Blake, sleeping in the same bed with him, exploring his body as he explored hers. She knew he, too, felt the chemistry between them, but who was going to be the first one to make a move in that direction? Of course, the timing could be better. They were, after all, searching for Blake's missing mother, but she couldn't imagine being alone with Blake for the rest of the night and doing nothing about it.

It was time to think about something else before Blake smelled her arousal or noticed her quickening heartbeat thumping at the base of her throat. Lost in her erotic thoughts, Alyssa hadn't realized that Blake had pulled into the hotel parking lot until he turned off the engine. Embarrassed and flustered at being caught daydreaming, Alyssa said the first thing that popped into her mind. "You're only getting one room, right?"

Alyssa winced, turning her face away so he couldn't see the blush spreading across her face. Oh, damn. How obvious could she be? She felt like slapping herself in the forehead for not controlling her wayward thoughts or painting a bright, big *Z* for loser on her forehead with a hot pink Sharpie.

Blake swallowed visibly, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. He grinned at her with that oh so sexy smile of his and eased her rampant heart by saying, "One room sounds like a really, really good idea to me."

Alyssa smiled with relief, and released the breath she'd been holding, grateful that they were of the same mind after all, despite how tired they both were. She didn't know what she would have done if she'd made a fool of herself and he rejected her. How do you live something like that down? Now she wouldn't have to find out, which made her grin all over again.

"What are you smiling about?"

“Oh, nothing. How about we get out of the car and go find that room.” Alyssa stepped out of the car and tilted her head toward the night sky, letting the wind gently kiss her upturned cheeks before turning to meet his gaze. “I really want a nice long soak to help me relax.”

Blake moved to the back of the car, unlocked the trunk and quickly gathered his duffel.

She wondered how he kept himself from pouncing on her comment. Maybe they weren’t on the same wavelength after all, she thought, swallowing nervously.

“Did I tell you how brave you are?” he asked.

When Blake went to retrieve Alyssa’s bag, she stepped around him and picked it up herself. “What do you mean?”

“Even though you were terrified, you still got on that plane. It took a lot of courage to do that.”

She cleared her throat. “Well, uh, thanks.” Deep down though, she knew it wasn’t a matter of courage, but the knowledge that there was just no way she could have allowed him to face this trip alone, no matter how frightened she might be about the way they were getting there.

Before she could come up with anything else to say, Blake grabbed her hand, laced their fingers together and headed toward the lobby entrance of the hotel. It felt good to be touching him again, she thought, to feel his hand clasping hers. Such a simple thing, but it brought her pleasure nonetheless.

The brightly lit lobby was all but empty except for a pair of lovebirds wrapped around each other, all tangling tongues and roving hands as they waited for their elevator to arrive. The clerk standing behind the reception desk was too busy ogling the necking couple to notice that Blake and Alyssa were standing right in front of him, waiting to check in.

Blake cleared his throat, blatantly calling for the clerk’s

attention. It took impatiently dinging the bell twice, before the clerk noticed he had customers. Alyssa only smiled, too caught up in the humor of the situation to be agitated.

Blushing, the clerk turned toward them. "Can I help you?"

"If it's not too much trouble," Blake drawled, annoyance evident in his tone of voice.

The clerk obviously got the hint, finally giving Blake and Alyssa his full attention. "What can I do for you?"

"We'd like a room, please."

All business now, he asked, "A room with a single King bed, or one with two Queens, Sir?"

Blake looked to Alyssa to see if she'd changed her mind

Alyssa smiled and answered herself. "King please."

After taking Blake's credit card information and printing out their receipt, he handed Blake the magnetic keycard for the room. "Take the elevator to the sixth floor. Your room number is 642. The hotel restaurant is closed for the night, but reopens for breakfast at six in the morning, but you can call for room service twenty-four hours a day." Having finished his speech in record time, the clerk looked toward the elevator bank, only to find the lobby empty. Unfortunately, it appeared his entertainment for the night was over.

Blake muttered a quick thank you and headed for the elevator, Alyssa right on his heels. She used the elevator ride to study Blake from beneath her lowered lashes. She had to admit, she felt drawn to him, not only physically, but emotionally as well. Sure, she wanted to make love to him, who wouldn't? God knows she was having a hard time keeping her hands to herself. More than that, she wanted to share her thoughts and feelings with him, too.

Alyssa's gaze roved over his body, lingering on the raging hard-on pressing against the zipper of his jeans. She could smell

his arousal, hanging heavy in the air, its fragrance filling the small enclosure until the air thickened with the scent of desire. Her body raged for release. Her hands shook, her heart thundered and her pussy grew slick with need. She was desperate to feel his touch upon her skin, prayed the elevator would move just a little bit faster so she could be alone with him. She needed that now more than anything.

Finally, the elevator opened on their floor. Alyssa wanted to snicker at their obviousness as they practically raced out of the elevator, each aiming to get to the room as fast as possible. Considering their preternatural speed as Were-wolves, they could move pretty darn fast.

The room was spacious as far as hotel rooms go, with a mini-fridge and coffeepot and a separate little seating area, but the bed was the focal point of the room, immediately drawing Alyssa's attention.

A cherry wood four-poster, piled with luxurious Egyptian fabrics and mounds of colorful pillows, it couldn't have been any more inviting. Glancing over at her mate, she had to rethink that. It would be more inviting if Blake posed in the center of it, wearing nothing but a naughty smile while waiting on her to join him.

She couldn't take her eyes off the bed. Made for a night of carnal pleasure, she could imagine just what she could do on that four-poster with some silk scarves and a very long night. In her eyes, the room looked like a cross between the Victorian boudoir of a favored mistress and the luxurious sensuality found only in a sultan's harem.

Needing something to distract herself, Alyssa dropped her bag at the foot of the bed as Blake headed for the bathroom. Within seconds, Alyssa heard running water and knew that he'd remembered her request for a hot bath and started one for her.



He came back out seconds later while she was bent over, rifling through her bag.

"I've got your water running," he mumbled. Blake cleared his throat, obviously hoping to take a moment to get his chaotic hormones under control.

She guessed how close he was to losing it, considering the strength of the arousal wafting off him. If he was experiencing half of what she was, he probably thought if he walked closer to her, he might frighten her away.

"Is there anything else you need?"

Alyssa purposefully met his gaze and smiled. Blake looked about as nervous as she felt. It was good to know that she wasn't the only one having jitters. "Ah, no. I was just looking for the book I packed. Reading in the tub after a stressful day helps me relax."

"Oh, well then. I'll wash up when you're done." Blake turned away and turned on the TV, switching it over to a late-night talk show as Alyssa headed toward the bathroom, book in hand.

After closing the door behind her, Alyssa leaned back against it. Her heart pounded against her chest as nervousness overwhelmed her. She didn't know if she could go through with it. What if she ended up doing something he didn't like? Hell, she was jumping into bed with the man after less than twenty-four hours of meeting him. Didn't that make her a slut? Then again, can a virgin be a slut?

She decided that for now, she just wouldn't think about it. She had a tub full of bubbly hot water, a great novel to relax with and the rest of the midnight hours to sort out how she was feeling and what she wanted to do about it.

An hour later, she emerged from the bath wrapped in a cloud of steam and a fluffy hotel bathrobe monogrammed with the word *hers*. She found Blake stretched out on the bed, flipping

through the channels and holding a can of coke to his lips. “It’s all yours, Blake.”

Blake nodded, dropped the remote on the bed, and rushed toward the bathroom, shaving kit in his hand.

But not before Alyssa noticed his hard-on.

“There’s not much on, but the TV is all yours,” he said before shutting the door with more force than was needed.

Alyssa was too nervous to sit on the bed, pretending to watch television so she opted to investigate the room instead. The hotel had provided a well-stocked mini-bar. In fact, if she were a drinker, there was enough liquor in the room to keep her drunk for a good long while. Opening up the mini-fridge, Alyssa found several bottles of water and another can of soda sitting on the shelf. After grabbing the pop, Alyssa moved to the bank of windows on the far side of the room and stared out into the dark. The view was spectacular. The lights of San Francisco were spread out before her. So many people out there—some in the city, others in the hills. What were they doing right now? Were they exploring the land of dreams or were they like she, planning a night of lovemaking with the one they called their own?

After finally allowing her mind to relax, it was easy for Alyssa to make a decision about the future. It all came down to the fact that they weren’t Human and neither Human morals nor their dating rules and practices were relevant to the situation she and Blake were in.

It wasn’t a question of whether or not they were right for each other. That decision had been determined long before they’d even been born. Their hearts and souls already recognized that they belonged together. It was just their minds that needed to catch up. Besides, what she didn’t know about Blake now, she’d know soon enough. That was just the way it was between mates who could share a telepathic bond.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been staring down at the city below, imagining the hours ahead, but Alyssa felt Blake's presence in the room long before she felt his hands rest upon her shoulders.

## Chapter Eight

Her mind tried to take over, telling her to move away from his touch, that she had enough going on at the moment and her energies were better focused elsewhere. Yet all she could seem to center on was her need to be with this man, to feel his body pressed to hers, filling her aching, empty pussy. She wanted to hold him against her pounding heart, knowing he felt the same exact way.

She didn't know enough about his past, not really. But she did know that he was hers and she was his. The only question that remained was who would be the first one to admit it, the first one to announce their passion and need of the other, both physically and emotionally.

Who would be the first one to give into the fiery desire simmering beneath the calm façade they both were trying so hard to maintain? Who would be the first to admit that it was more than just physical attraction? This was a bone-deep need to be with each other, one soul calling to the other, desperate for fulfillment. Who would be the first to succumb to it?

Blake didn't say a word. He didn't have to. Alyssa could feel his heart beating against her back. Time seemed to stop, one heartbeat, then two and all Alyssa could do was feel. Feel his gentle strength, his steely determination to claim her.

Breathing became impossible. Every nerve ending burned so sensitive she feared moving. She could smell his scent, knew that he was incredibly aroused. She'd never been so desperate to feel another's arms around her, to feel a man's cock pound her into unconsciousness. Aroused beyond bearing, she feared that the slightest movement would send her over the edge.

She could feel his every breath as it tickled the nape of her neck and feel the length of his cock pulsing with need. She wanted to turn around and wrap her arms around his waist, to lay her head against his heart. Yet she also wanted to run away, flee from his touch, knowing that her life would forever change once they made love. Torn between desire to submit to him and fear of the unknown, she stood frozen, waiting for Blake's next move.

Alyssa knew that once they made love there'd be no going back, no chance to slow their relationship down. If she took this step, Blake would always be a part of her life, a part of her soul. But did she really have a choice?

From the time they were born, they were destined to be mates. Every time he looked her way, her heart rate jumped, her hands shook and her pussy clenched with need. Her hands itched, desperate to explore every inch of his body. What would his skin feel like against her fingertips? Would his nipples be as sensitive as hers if she were to suckle them? She couldn't wait to find out the answers for herself.

Blake wasn't a gentle man. She knew that without having him tell her. But Alyssa really didn't want gentle, not the first time they made love because there was nothing gentle in the passion he stirred in her. He made her smile. He gave her comfort and understanding. She wanted to show him how much she needed him, how much she cherished their developing bond and how much she looked forward to spending their lives together. She

needed him to know beyond a doubt that her heart and soul belonged to him, now and forever.

Blake's husky voice dripped with sensuality when he asked, "Will you turn around, honey? I need to see the woman who I'm about to make mine."

His question immediately gave her goose bumps. Whether caused by what he said or how he said it, Alyssa didn't know. She was positive that no one should have the ability to seduce another by voice alone.

\* \* \* \*

Blake could feel Alyssa tense beneath his hands. He'd tried to give her some time, some space, but it was like trying to stop a wild fire with a watering can. He needed to be with her. So much was going on, so many questions about recent events weighing him down. But there was no question about the rightness of this.

He needed Alyssa. That's all there was to it.

It was more than an overactive libido demanding attention. It was a desperate need to become one with her, to feel whole for the first time in his life, to share himself completely with another. To share his thoughts, his desires, his dreams, and more than that, to share his very heart and soul with the one meant only for him.

He needed. In every way possible, he needed to be with Alyssa. He just hoped she was ready because he didn't think he could wait a moment longer to make her his, in every sense of the word. It was time to complete the mating ritual. Time to bind her to him completely.

With exquisite care, Blake trailed his fingers slowly down Alyssa's arms, covering her hands with his, lacing their fingers together. He took a step closer, pressing his full length against

her back, surrounding her with his body, his heat.

Trembling with need, Blake could barely control his urge to plunder, to mark her as his. He wanted their first time together to be perfect. He wanted to take his time, to explore all of her secret places. He wanted to taste her, to make her scream, to hear her cry out his name as she reached her woman's pleasure. He wanted all that and so much more.

"I'm afraid," she whispered.

"Afraid of me?" he asked. Blake grew still, holding his breath as he awaited Alyssa's answer.

"Of all of this. Of us, of what's happening between us. I'm afraid of the timing and whether we're drawn together because of what we are. Are our feelings fate's way of continuing our species, manufactured so we'll procreate? What if this isn't real, Blake? I don't know if I can handle knowing that this isn't real," she confessed.

He had to smile at that, he couldn't help himself. "You are one of the strongest people I have ever met—man or woman. I think you could handle just about anything on your own if that was what you wanted." Gently, so as not to startle her, he turned her in his arms. He needed to see her face, to look into her eyes. "But the point is, I don't want you to have to face anything alone, not anymore. Tonight's just the beginning for us."

Alyssa blushed at his compliment. He knew she could feel his sincerity through their bond and could hear the truth of his words in his voice. Needing to know what she was thinking, what she felt, he merged their thoughts.

*Do I believe him? Do I give in to this burning need to take him to my bed and hope that he's right about our destiny?* She burned for Blake, desperately needed him to put out the flames licking through her body. She just didn't know how to show him.

Blake could smell the musky scent of her arousal as her

thoughts focused on him. Knowing she was as hot for him as he was for her threatened what little remained of his self-control. He had to taste her mouth. It was more than a desperate desire. It was a gut-wrenching necessity. "Let me kiss you, honey," he whispered, knowing she couldn't resist the plea in his voice. If it was only her own need, then maybe she could have resisted the pull between them, but he used his voice shamelessly, something he couldn't make himself regret. She didn't know how to answer him in words, to tell him what she wanted. He could sense that from her without intruding on her actual thoughts.

She surprised him instead by stepping forward, to rest her body against his, not leaving any space between them. *I need this. I need you*, she admitted. *It scares me how much I already depend on you, Blake.*

*We'll depend on each other, Alyssa. That's the way it is between mates.*

Now that she'd made up her mind to go for it, she apparently wasn't going to hold anything back. With a boldness that surprised him, Alyssa reached up between their bodies and speared her fingers into his hair, dragging his head down to hers.

With infinite slowness, Blake closed the distance between them, pressing his lips against hers in a gentle caress. It was whisper soft and incredibly sweet. He reined in his hunger, not allowing his need to overwhelm her. As he struggled to be gentle with her, she trembled beneath his hands, reinforcing his desire not to frighten her.

*I'm not trembling because of fear. I don't need you to be gentle, Blake. I'm not made of spun glass, easily breakable. I'm your mate, your equal in every way.*

She took control of the kiss, letting him feel her desire, telling him exactly what she wanted from him and gentleness obviously



wasn't it. With lips, tongue and teeth, she ravaged his mouth and he could only go along for the ride. He went under fast, too caught up in the heat and passion of their kiss to consider taking things slower. He dragged her body closer, gripped her hips to keep her pressed against him. She moaned, rubbing her body along his. Thank God, she didn't mind his aggression and, judging by the way she responded to his touch, she didn't want slow any more than he did.

It was all the encouragement he needed. He wrapped his arms around her waist, dragging her impossibly closer. He wanted to feel her warmth engulf him, to burn with her until neither could exist without the other. He wanted to hear her scream out his name as she came apart in his arms. He wanted to sink his cock into her tight pussy and feel it clench around him as it milked him of his come, but mostly, he wanted to crawl inside her heart and stay there for the rest of their days.

Still, the kiss went on, growing deeper, hotter than either had ever thought possible. How would he survive the coming hours when he was already so turned on he might explode before ever getting the chance to sink his body into hers? With incredible ease, Blake lifted Alyssa off her feet, "Wrap your legs around my waist, Alyssa," he growled. She did so immediately.

He couldn't seem to catch his breath. Her hands were everywhere as she clung to him, roaming over every centimeter of exposed skin. He was mindless, unable to deny her anything, *unwilling* to deny her anything. With her legs wound tightly around his waist, Alyssa had to feel the strength of his erection through both of their robes. Blake was acutely aware of how easy it would be to take her now, to impale her on his shaft, but he wanted her first time to be full of pleasure, not pain.

*Is this what it feels like every time a couple makes love? The feelings, the sensations, are too intense. I can't seem to get close*

*enough, fast enough.*

*Never. It's never been like this before,* he admitted. Blake knew exactly what she meant. The fire raged in his veins, burning him from the inside out, and all the while the flames flared higher and higher, until they were consumed by them.

She was driving him wild. He needed to get her into bed. Now. Thank God, it was but a few steps away. Within seconds, he lowered her to the bed and then stepped back.

"You're not leaving are you?" Her voice quivered with uncertainty.

"Are you kidding? Nothing could drag me away from you now. I just want to slow it down a bit."

"I don't understand. Don't you want me?"

Blake smiled. "Of course I do." He was nearly blind with lust, desperately needing to feel her hands on his body. "Let me show you just how much I want you," he continued, slowly carrying her hand down to the rigid bulge beneath his robe. Knowing she'd never touched a man so intimately, he watched Alyssa's apparent fascination with the feel of his shaft.

*You're silky soft and bone hard, an intriguing combination.* She must have realized she'd gripped his cock for several seconds because she gasped, blushing from the roots of her hair to the polish on her toes.

He smiled, amused at her embarrassment. "You had to have felt my hard-on." After taking another step back, Blake loosened the belt of his robe and let it fall to the floor. Instead of going straight to the bed, he stood there, letting her look at him for as long as she wished.

Her blatant appreciation was having a definite affect on his body. His erection waved at her, as if it was saying, "Here I am. Here I am. Want to come out and play?" So long as her answer was yes, he would stand there as long as she demanded.

"You're so beautiful," she whispered, her voice thick with both awe and desire. *You're all sculpted muscle with a body any man would envy. Her gaze roamed his body. From your roguishly handsome face to your brawny arms, rock-hard abs and very impressive erection, to those equally powerful thighs and fantastic ass. Hell, you even have beautiful feet, if feet can be beautiful.*

With her frank assessment and honest appreciation, it took everything he had not to jump her where she lay. How could he have gotten so lucky? Perhaps though, it wasn't luck, but destiny pointing him straight toward the right path, toward her.

Without breaking eye contact, she scrambled to her knees and began to untie her robe. He could feel her nervousness, but also her desperation as her hands shook uncontrollably, making the simple task a nearly impossible exercise.

With his beast riding him hard, desperate to claim her, he stepped forward and reached for her. "Let me," Blake insisted. Instead of reaching for the belt, he lightly ran a finger down her cheek and across her bottom lip. "But first, I want to taste your mouth again. It couldn't possibly taste as sweet as I remember."

"What am I supposed to say to that?" she asked, clearly flustered.

He groaned, growing more desperate for her touch with every second that passed. After one last chance to back out, he lowered his mouth to hers. It was a silky slide of tongue caressing tongue in a dance as old as time itself. Blake couldn't get enough of her. He'd never get enough of her. With a tenderness he didn't feel, he pulled away to carefully untie her robe, then eased it off her shoulders and tossed it on the floor in a heap. He needed her naked, now, he couldn't wait any longer. He was far too close to the edge to be patient.

She was so beautiful to him. "You take my breath away," he

murmured, desperate to touch her bare skin, to sink his cock into her luscious body and mark her as his. But he didn't, he wouldn't until she made the next move. This had to be what she wanted, too.

Without even a second's hesitation, she held out her hand to him.

Blake's hands itched with the need to touch Alyssa. Could her skin possibly be as soft as it looked, he wondered.

"I could ask the same of you," she countered.

He started, unaware that their minds had merged. Then she smiled and he was lost.

"Are you going to make love to me?" she asked. "Or are you going to stand there and stare at me all night?"

He smiled slyly and gave a short nod. "Actually, I thought I'd do a little bit of both, if that's all right with you?"

Alyssa took the lead, scooting to the head of the bed, posing against the pillows and silently beckoning him with a come-hither smile and a crook of her finger. It was all the invitation he needed.

He eased onto the bed and made his way over to her. With infinite tenderness, he slowly lowered his head, never taking his gaze off hers, and began feathering kisses against her eyes, her forehead, her cheeks and finally her mouth. He wanted to devour her, but settled for nibbles instead, working his way from the curve of her ear to the throbbing pulse at her neck.

Careful not to crush her with his heavier weight or rush her into something she wasn't ready for, Blake's body slowly moved over hers. He wasn't prepared for the feel of her fingers trailing ever so lightly down his chest, his abs and then finally wrapping around his cock. Nor was he prepared to hear the soft sighs of delight at what she found.

How was he supposed to go slow if she was going to touch

him with such daring curiosity? How could he be gentle when she had him barely holding on to his self-control? He needed to back off, slow things down—if that was even possible at this point. He felt poised on the edge of a deep chasm and all he wanted to do was let himself fall in. Although the mating call was riding him hard, demanding that he take her now, to stake his claim, ruthlessly if need be, she deserved to be well pleased, to enjoy every moment of what was to come.

He slowly backed away, just enough so that a few precious inches were separating them. He wanted nothing more than to spend hours licking and touching her every curve and hollow and all of her skin in between.

"Where are you going?" she asked, her voice husky with need.

"Not far, Alyssa. I just wanted to look at you for a minute." Blake let his gaze roam over her body. She was perfect for him—a wild mass of red curls that rioted over the pillows and emerald eyes a man could stare into forever. Her lush, pouty lips just begged to be kissed and her curves could make a man drool if he wasn't careful.

My God, what curves they were. Her breasts would fit in his hands perfectly. He could just imagine how soft and silky they'd feel against his palms. His heated gaze raked her from head to toe. Her rosy nipples puckered in response, begging to be touched. How he ached to tease them with his lips, his tongue, to suckle them ever so gently before plundering her bounty. Then he'd explore the rest of her womanly curves—her narrow waist, gently rounded hips and legs that seemed to go on forever before settling down between her thighs and eating her creaming pussy. All in all, the entire package was perfect to his way of thinking and he couldn't wait to lose himself in her heat.

He could feel her impatience growing, but when she reached

up and ran her fingers through his hair, then pulled him down for a long, tongue dueling, mind-blowing kiss that seemed to suspend time, he completely lost whatever self-control he had left. It could have been seconds, minutes, hell maybe even hours before he could break away long enough to draw breath, but when she pulled him back down, crushing her lips to his, it only enflamed him further. Why was he delaying their mating when she apparently was as hot for him as he was for her? Hell, he had no idea.

Knowing she was quickly reaching her limits, Blake slowly moved down her body, his tongue trailed over every inch of her skin, avoiding her breasts and her tightly puckered nipples. He planned to spend quite a bit of time ravishing them. But first, he needed to taste her essence, lick the cream he could see dripping from her pussy.

Before she could guess his next move and perhaps protest, he placed her legs over his shoulders and gently parted her with his fingers. The second his tongue touched her clit, her entire body grew rigid and a keening moan filled the room. He smiled against her, then once again flicked the little nub with his tongue. She shot off like a rocket, screaming his name over and over, begging him to take her, to stop torturing her even as she continued to come for what seemed like hours, not just the seconds that had actually passed. She wanted more, begged for more. She wanted him deep inside her and he couldn't wait to give into her demands.

After savoring the results of her climax, Blake once again started working his way up her body. He stopped at her breasts, then slowly trailed his finger around and around her puckered nipple, watching in amazement as the nub grew harder. He couldn't wait to taste them, couldn't wait until one day they grew plump, filled with the milk that would nourish their cubs. While

still lost in visions of the future, she grabbed him by the shoulders and tried to yank him toward her, but he didn't budge.

With the ease of someone who knew just what to do to drive a woman to the edge of her patience, Blake lightly tweaked her other nipple until they were both standing at attention, just waiting for inspection. How could he refuse such a tempting offering?

"Blake, please." She begged. *Don't you know how much I need you—need to feel you pressed against me, buried inside me?*

Finally, he lowered his head, swirling his tongue around one rosy tip, before taking it into his mouth, sucking greedily, all the while using his other hand to pluck her other nipple. It wouldn't be right to ignore the pebbled nub while lavishing attention on the other.

Alyssa squirmed beneath him, her movements frantic. Hell, he couldn't take much more of this himself. He couldn't take not kissing her a moment longer. He had to taste her again. With that thought in mind, he left her breasts and rose to ravish her mouth. Their tongues swirled and twirled around each other. Her lips were silky soft, a contrast to his. Her taste exploded on his tongue, swamped his mind, intoxicating him. He knew that he needed to come up for air, but not yet. Not just yet. After a few more minutes of ravaging her mouth, he knew it was no longer enough. He needed more. He needed her. Now. "Roll over, Alyssa," he growled.

"What?"

"I need you on your stomach, sweetheart. It's part of the initial mating ritual."

"Oh, Okay." They weren't going to do anything kinky, were they? Well, kinky with Blake might be a fascinating thing to experience.

He wanted to chuckle. He knew she didn't know she was projecting her thoughts to him. He also knew she wouldn't like that he was aware of what she was thinking. He was also wise enough to know she wouldn't find the humor in this situation. Instead, he focused on her body, on all the things he wanted to do to her, experience with her. When she finally complied, dropping her chest down onto the mattress and lifting her ass into the air, he thought he'd come right then and there. Such a simple act of submission but it just about felled him.

Obediently, Alyssa pillowed her head on her arms. Blake knew she was anxious, but they had to follow their kind's customs when making love for the first time. That meant he'd have to try to convince her to let him make love to her from behind, doggy style, so to speak, though she didn't seem to have a problem with it so far even if she had questioned him at first.

Though his beast wanted desperately to mount her, mark her and mate her, he also didn't want to rush things. They had all night. He would show her tenderness before mating with her as custom demanded. Of course, she wasn't like others of their kind. She was independent as all get out, as well as a believer in equal opportunity and able to think for herself. Hell, she'd probably enjoy herself, even after he pinned her shoulder from behind, his teeth clamping down as he demanded submission while he entered her.

Damn, she was even more luscious from the back. At the base of her spine, she had two dimples and her ass was not only lush, but firm as well. She obviously worked out a lot. There wasn't a spare ounce of fat anywhere on her body.

"Dammit, Blake," Alyssa moaned.

He smiled at the clear frustration in her voice. Just knowing that within seconds she'd be forever his, had his heart racing, his palms shaking and his cock hard as rock. "Hold on, baby. This



might get rough.”

## Chapter Nine

Alyssa couldn't believe it. Here she knelt, all posed, ready for him to continue seducing her and he was just staring at her. What the hell was taking him so long? Her nipples brushed against the comforter beneath her as she quivered in desperate need, making her ache and throb all the more. She was dying, hovering on a point between pleasure and pain, her every nerve as taut as that of an archer's bow. She needed what only he could give her, completion—in body, heart and soul and she needed it now.

She was just about to snap at him when she felt his tongue trace the curve of her spine and swirl around her ass cheeks. Beneath him, she quivered with need. She was ready now and he'd most definitely reached his limit on foreplay if the way he trembled above her meant anything. Maybe the next time they made love, he'd let her touch him a bit more. Alyssa felt Blake raise his head and pause. "Blaaake, for the love of... Have mercy on me already," she pleaded.

"I'm about to, Alyssa."

She quickly glanced over her shoulder at Blake, uncertain what he had in mind, but curious all the same. She trusted him, even after knowing him such a short time. So she knew whatever his intentions, he would do nothing to harm her.

"You're ready for me now, baby. It might hurt at first, but just breathe through the pain." Grabbing a couple of pillows from the base of the bed, Blake placed them beneath her hips. From behind, he bent over her, sank his teeth into her left shoulder to pin her into place, and with a quick thrust, took her maidenhead.

Alyssa gave a muffled groan as he tore through the barrier marking her as a virgin and claimed her. She didn't mind the teeth in the shoulder thing though because it felt *right*, but the pain, though expected, jarred her out of the euphoria that had begun to overwhelm her.

After a few moments, the throbbing ache between her legs passed and she was ready for him to continue. "Please, Blake. I need you to move." So move he did, not needing to be told twice. He made love to her as though he had all night and half the next day to spend in bed with her.

Alyssa couldn't believe how good it felt. She didn't know pleasure could be this insane. In and out, he stroked her. Deeper and harder, he rode her. Sweat-slicked skin glistened in the low lamplight. Gasps and moans echoed throughout the room. When they finally reached their climax and her pussy clamped down on his cock and milked him of his cum, she was reluctant to separate their bodies.

A few minutes later, Blake gently withdrew and rolled off to the side. "I'll be right back, baby" he whispered.

Wondering what he was up to, Alyssa gingerly rose from bed and blushed as she spotted the blood on her thigh, evidence of what they'd shared. She assumed Blake was washing up when she heard the water running, instead her man was running a tub of hot water.

"For me?"

"Dammit. I wanted to carry you in here. I knew you'd

probably be feeling a little sore and the bath, along with our natural healing capabilities, should make you feel much better.”

“Ah well, it’s the thought that counts.”

“Don’t make me out as a saint. My reasons are selfish. I want to spend the rest of the night making love to you.”

“Oh, well then, I guess I should get soaking,” she said, holding back a chuckle. She was feeling so happy right now, she thought she’d burst. And she was definitely looking forward to the rest of the night and every night from now on.

Later that morning Alyssa woke with the knowledge that her life was no longer her own and it didn’t bother her one bit, which in and of itself was unlike her. Of course, the feel of Blake’s hard body pressed against her back and the heavy weight of his arm draped across her waist was her first clue. The second, being the unaccustomed soreness and aches resulting from a night of intense lovemaking. Come to think of it, they got very little sleep at all.

“You’re pretty quiet this morning. You aren’t having regrets already, are you?” Blake asked, his raspy voice thick with sleep and as sexy as all get out.

She could listen to his voice forever and never be bored. It both spooked her and kept her breathless, the combination left her continuously on edge. “No, no regrets.” After a short pause to gather her nerves, she asked, “You?”

Blake wrapped his arms around her a little tighter, drawing her closer to his body so that they were perfectly aligned. “Not a one,” he replied. “It was beyond a doubt the most perfect night of my life.”

“It was, wasn’t it? Do we have time for an encore this morning?”

Blake growled. “Don’t tempt me, woman. We have places to

go and things to investigate.”

Alyssa tensed as a wave of guilt washed over her. She should be out there trying to locate Blake’s mother. Yet instead, she wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of the morning in bed, wallowing in pleasure. How could she be so selfish? Of course he needed to find his mother right away. What had she been thinking?

Shame battered her soul. How could she have forgotten the other woman even for a moment? Knowing her selfishness must end, she emotionally withdrew from Blake, building a wall between them mentally so that her thoughts and emotions would not influence his. She needed to get away from him physically, too, because she didn’t trust herself now. Her whole body became rigid as she scooted away just enough so that they were no longer touching. Blake was probably feeling a little guilty, too, but she couldn’t bring herself to ask.

“Tell you what,” he whispered, “after we’re through looking into what happened at the compound, we’re going to spend some quality time together and lots of it.”

She raised her eyes to meet his, surprised by the ferocity in them. It was like watching a volcano preparing to erupt. Then just as abruptly, his eyes reflected the utter calm of a secluded mountain lake, with not even a ripple in sight. Alyssa saw the world in his gaze, just like that old cliché, the eyes are the windows into the soul. Corny, but in Blake’s case, the absolute truth.

Blake scooted closer to her, closing the gap she’d purposely put between them. She stayed stiff in his arms, like a statue. She fought the desire to lean back and accept his need to snuggle with her. If she allowed herself to lean on him, even physically, she might never be able to be alone again. Besides, she needed to focus all her energies on finding Blake’s mother and

discovering what really happened at the compound.

\* \* \* \*

Blake felt Alyssa close her emotions to him. She couldn't have hurt him more by her withdrawal than if she'd slapped him in the face, but she was in for a fight if she thought she could back out of their relationship now, even temporarily. No matter what the circumstances currently were, he would never give her up. With the ease of a man who knew just how to touch a woman to make her sing out her pleasure, Blake set out to make Alyssa quiver in his arms. Using his fingertips, he seduced her with his touch alone.

His hands continued to glide seductively over her arms, down the spine of her back and then along the cheeks of her luscious ass, managing to bring her to a fevered pitch without so much as a kiss along the sensitive nape of her neck. Nor were there whispers telling her exactly what he planned to teach her, he implied by touch alone.

Alyssa could think again if she thought he would ever let her withdraw from him. If their relationship was strictly physical, maybe she could fight that, but their destinies decreed they were mates and neither of them could battle that. "You're not going to lose your independence, Alyssa. Neither of us can fight what's between us. The decision was made before either one of us were born."

"How do you know exactly what I was thinking? Our people are empathaths and telepaths on a small level, but how in the hell are you able to know exactly what I was thinking?" He saw her full-blown rage and underneath it all, her panic.

"I didn't mean to scare you, honey." When he tried to comfort her, she scooted out of bed as if it was on fire, dragging

the comforter with her.

"Well, dammit, that's exactly what you did. How will I ever know if my thoughts are really my own?"

He saw another burst of panic shoot through her.

"You can't control me with your thoughts or make me say or do things you want me to, can you?"

"You just have to trust me when I say I would never manipulate you like that, ever."

"I'm so sorry, Blake. I knew you'd never do such a thing before you even told me. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm feeling in a pretty bitchy mood right now and don't have a clue why."

"Why don't you come back to bed and give me a hug and I'll tell you why you're acting the way you are."

Alyssa looked over at him.

Blake held out his hand, daring her to put her trust in him.

"I've never trusted anyone more. I'm yours and you are mine," she said with a smile. Dropping the comforter she'd wrapped around herself, Alyssa sashayed over to the bed, then jumped his bones literally.

Blake was flattened beneath her.

While looking deep into his eyes, she vowed, "I'll never doubt you again."

Blake wanted to blubber, but he was too manly to do that, and besides, what he had to tell her was too important. After tucking her head beneath his chin and wrapping his arms around her, Blake decided to just blurt it out. What he knew about Alyssa so far was enough to know that she'd be upset by the news. "The reason you're in this mood and why neither of us could keep our hands off each other last night was... Well..." he cleared his throat.

"Just spit it out already."

Using every bit of courage he possessed, he did exactly what she asked. "Honey, you're in heat."

"What?"

*Better tell her the rest*, he thought. "And more than likely you'll get pregnant pretty darn quick. If not last night, then the next time we make love." Whatever reaction he'd expected, it certainly wasn't the one he got.

"Would that be bad news, or good?"

Blake couldn't help himself, he chuckled and then roared with laughter.

"That wasn't meant as a joke, you idiot. I was serious."

"I know you were, Alyssa. I just thought you'd be angry is all."

"So then, answer my damn question."

"You do realize you use the word *damn* an awful lot, don't you?"

"Don't make me smack you. You're stalling."

"Alyssa, I'd love to see you pregnant with my child, hell children if it came to that. But the timing is up to you. I understand we're just getting to know each other, but you know as well as I that we will be together, always. So when you're ready, I say we go for it. That's my opinion anyway."

"And what if I said I was ready now."

Her smile was breathtaking, her eyes glittered with joy and he felt her love for him, her desire to have his child, through their telepathic link. "I'd say let's get to the compound and spend tonight working on that goal." After smacking her lightly on her ass, Blake rolled over and quickly jumped out of bed before he lost all self-control and started working on a baby right that minute.

"Party pooper," she said with a grumble.

But he was already in the shower. He was a wise man because



if he'd offered to wash her back that wasn't all they'd be doing in there and they'd never get to the compound.

She had gathered up her clothes for after her shower, when Blake walked out wearing nothing but a towel. He watched her nod her head and take off for the bathroom.

"I will not touch, I will not touch," she chanted over and over until she was locked behind the bathroom door. She could hear Blake chuckling on the other side of the door and sensed his amusement at her antics through the bond. Ignoring him, she stepped into the shower and turned the knob to cold.

She emerged fifteen minutes later, her libido evidently under control and ready to complete the task they had come here to do.

"Are you hungry?" Blake asked.

"Oh, you have no idea just how hungry I am."

Blake swallowed, too tempted at the idea of eating her for lunch. It would be much more expedient if they left the motel room—this minute.

As they strolled down the hallway with their bags, Blake suggested they find somewhere to eat before they started out on their three-hour car trip to the compound. Normally, he would have just taken a jumper plane, but he wasn't about to put her on a plane again until they had to get back to Jersey, especially not one as small as a four-passenger Cessna Skyhawk.

After thirty minutes of driving around, they found a restaurant specializing in steaks. While they waited for coffee, Alyssa interrupted their small talk. Blake understood that she had something important to say. Something weighed heavily on her mind.

Just then, the waitress arrived with their cheesecake and coffee. As she turned to go Alyssa grabbed her hand, pulling her to a stop. "Wait a minute. I need a witness," she said. Alyssa stood up, pulling a small box out of her pocket, took Blake's

left hand in hers and got down on one knee. The room grew quiet in anticipation as Alyssa knelt at his feet.

He felt the heat in his face. He knew what she was about to do, but dammit he was the person who was supposed to be doing this, not her. He was going to have a serious talk about their roles when all was said and done.

When she opened the little jeweler's box, Blake gasped. She had obviously designed their wedding rings herself. Set in platinum was an emerald solitaire of at least three karats for her and a platinum band, etched with a pair of wolves looking toward the evening stars, for him. The stars, several quarter-carat blue diamonds, shot the viewer's gaze straight to the wolves' burnished topaz eyes.

Her voice was steady as she slipped the ring onto his finger and said, "Blake Donavon, know that forever and always you are my husband, my mate, my equal in all things, the missing half of my soul."

There was silence all around her, everyone held their breaths. For a second, Blake wondered if they were rushing things. But they both knew that they were destined to be together. And since she didn't see any reason in putting it off, he didn't either. Blake's voice wavered as he removed the solitaire from the box and placed it on Alyssa's left hand and replied in kind. After the words were said, he leaned forward and whispered. "You know, handfasting isn't done much anymore and it was never done in America. Witness or not, this isn't Scotland, so it's not legal here."

Blake slipped from his chair and joined her on the floor. "Will you marry me?"

"Like you need to ask. Of course I will."

"Oh man, that was so beautiful," the waitress cooed. All around them people began to clap and whistle as Blake and

Alyssa continued to look into each other's eyes.

After a moment they knew that neither of them was interested in cheesecake. Blake stood, held out his hand to help Alyssa rise, then went to pay the bill.

Once they were seated in the car, Blake slid his hand into his front left pocket. Turning to face Alyssa, he said, "I think this belongs to you." In his hand was a smaller ring, exactly matching the one she'd placed on his finger just a short time ago.

"How did you get this?" she whispered.

"My mother bought it on vacation years ago. She said it would lead me to my mate."

Alyssa swallowed, her voice shaky. "I made these on my twenty-first birthday. But money was tight and I was forced to sell it in order to get by. I couldn't make myself give up your ring though. The thought terrified me."

"Well, all I can say is that we definitely were meant to be together."

Alyssa chuckled. "I guess that settles it then."

Taking her left hand in his, Blake removed her engagement ring before sliding on her wedding band, then replacing the solitaire. Once again repeating his vows to her. "Alyssa, know that forever and always you are my wife, my mate, my equal in all things, the missing half of my soul."

Alyssa took a hold of his hair and yanked him toward her. "I think a kiss seals the deal doesn't it, well for Humans anyway?"

Within seconds the kiss of union turned into a five-alarm fire. Knowing that they had to get back on the road, Blake slowly eased away, licking his lips to savor her taste.

During the long trip north, they discussed many things, from their tastes in music, she preferred country, he, classical or rock, to how they were raised, and some of their favorite childhood memories. And when they weren't talking or arguing over what

radio station to play, the silences were companionable.

They arrived at the compound a little after three that afternoon, having driven over 160 miles. She enjoyed the trip, especially as they drove through Big Sur. She'd love to vacation there when they had more time. Do some hiking, pulling off to the side of the road to watch the ocean waves crash against the cliffs while seals sunned themselves on the rocks below.

As they stepped out of the car, she saw the compound had been deserted since the attack. Doors were left open, windows shattered. In fact, it looked as though everyone had just packed their bags and walked out, leaving the homestead vulnerable to vandals and wild animals.

Alyssa was surprised at how many homes the compound held. Perhaps thirty families living here at one time. And now it stood deserted. How terrible Blake must feel, between his unreasonable guilt at not being here and the anger that his home had been violated by something or someone, if not both.

They entered the communal dining room first to find empty beer cans, puddles of ice-melt and half eaten snacks on the long tables and floor.

"I need to get out of here. Let's go for a walk. We can search the rest of the area when we get back."

Alyssa knew Blake had reached his limit. His fury rolled off him in waves.

They left the compound, taking a gravelly road toward the surrounding woods. For two hours they just walked, barely speaking to each other, knowing that being together was more than enough to soothe his frayed nerves.

## Chapter Ten

Evening came faster than they expected. The fading light wasn't a problem though, Blake and Alyssa could see just as well at night as they could in the day. If there were any clues concerning his mother's disappearance and the tragic attack on the little girl, they would still find them.

"Do you hear that?"

"Hear what, Alyssa?"

"That's my point. I don't hear a thing. No crickets chirping, no frogs bellowing, not even the distant call of our four-legged brethren. It's just *too* quiet."

Blake cocked his head, listening to what Mother Nature was telling him. "You're right. I don't like the feel of this any more than you do." He clutched her hand, pulling her behind him as they made their way back toward the compound.

"We better find shelter. We could stay at the compound, but the monster that attacked Mom and the little girl could still be around and we just haven't picked up his scent yet." He glanced over his shoulder, to stare into Alyssa's eyes, wanting to gage her reaction to his suggestion, "Unless you'd prefer a motel room. There was one a few miles back, just off the highway."

She looked distraught and he knew why. Her heart was jumping chaotically at the thought of spending an entire evening

alone with him in the comforts of a motel room. Damned if he didn't feel the same way, but they both needed to get their unruly emotions and urges under control. Besides he didn't actually proposition her, just asked if she wanted to stay in a motel room. Either way, they had a killer to help apprehend. Their sex life would have to wait a while longer. Blake swallowed past the lump lodged in his throat. For the time being, he was intent on shrugging off his lust. After all, he wanted to get to know Alyssa better.

"Staying here at the compound is fine. Besides, we need to stick close by. Maybe your mom will just show up."

Deep down, he knew it would never happen that way. And so did she, but evidently she couldn't find it in herself to dash Blake's hopes without exhausting every possibility at finding his mother. She amazed him.

As Blake was about to answer, he noticed the wind begin to pick up. It whistled through the branches and the trees swayed back and forth to music only they heard.

The wind gusted its impatience, and was soon hurling branches through the air and tossing leaves like a dusting of snow that one shakes off the hood of their winter coat when they step inside.

Louder and louder, the wind howled, warning everyone within the area to find shelter and to find it now. Who was he to argue? Shouting to be heard over the wind's ferocious cacophony, Blake demanded "We need to change, now."

\* \* \* \*

Alyssa wasn't waiting around to be told twice. Deep in the trees as they were, there was no one around to watch them shimmy out of their clothes. Besides, Blake had already seen all of what

there was to see so she wasn't the least bit uneasy with being naked in his presence.

With the ease of someone who was comfortable performing the change, Alyssa hastily prepared physically and mentally for the transformation. Even though she was in a hurry to transform, it didn't prevent her from staring at Blake's gloriously naked body. She'd have to be dead not to notice just how well put together he was—from his six-pack abs to his corded biceps, which flagrantly screamed it would be okay to touch—just this once. Blake was a living breathing work of art. A living version of Michelangelo's statue of King David.

Too bad there wasn't enough time to allow her to run her fingers—and her tongue—over every inch of Blake's perfect body. But that wasn't to be. They were all too aware that something was approaching. Something evil.

In unison, Blake and Alyssa began the transformation from Human to wolf. They felt their bones popping, changing shape and size. Felt their muscles stretch, almost painfully, under the strain of the transformation. Where once they were lightly covered with Human hair, they grew luxurious pelts. Before they stood on two legs, now they walked on four. What felt like hours took but a few seconds to accomplish.

Once the change was complete, they stood still for a moment, trying to clear their heads and let the dizziness pass—a short-term effect of the change—before positioning themselves in strategic locations to await the new arrival.

Crouched low to the ground, the wolves sat patiently, well-aware of potential danger and knowing the odds of them going into battle were enormous.

Within the wolf's form, Alyssa took a deep breath. What did one say to Blake when declaring war on the unknown? "I'm glad that we met". Or maybe, "Try not to get hurt or I'll kill you

myself'. Two words came to her mind, and she whispered them through their mental link. *Be careful*. It was so intimate talking to Blake telepathically. It was an aphrodisiac in and of itself.

*You too*, he returned.

Blake had to know she was worried. She felt it through their bond. He was also sure to feel her unease with their current situation. She was wary of loving anyone completely, afraid to get attached and then lose that loved one, especially to death. Blake had to understand that. He, also, had lost most of his family and now faced the possible loss of his mother.

But it was too late, they were a part of each other now, their souls and hearts bonded.

Alyssa knew the stranger was there long before she saw him. He was a bull of a man. With a massive chest and bulging biceps, he stood at least six and a half feet tall.

With carrot red hair, a full beard, and dressed in a plaid shirt, well-worn jeans and wide suspenders, he could be mistaken for a lumberjack who'd lost his way while roaming in the woods. All he needed was an ax in his hand to complete the image. It was a brilliant disguise, but a disguise, nonetheless. It had to be. What was he trying to hide? Who was he?

Breaking into Alyssa thoughts, Blake added, *A better question is, what the hell is he?*

He wasn't a *Loup-garou* and he wasn't Vampire. In fact, neither Blake nor Alyssa felt any evil coming from him at all. Slowly, the wolves approached the stranger, wariness in their every step, each aware they could be mistaken and the stranger might attack.

Alyssa reached out with her senses, trying to get into the stranger's mind.

They were within twenty feet of him when they stopped and began growling, forcing the newcomer to freeze where he stood.



"Please. I mean you no harm. I've come to help."

They continued to growl, but didn't move any closer.

"My name's Keenan Muldoon. I've come to search for my kin, that's all."

Moving again, they circled him.

"Is it my scent you don't like? Please don't attack. I need your help."

Deep within the wolf, Alyssa's senses flew wild. *He's not Human, Blake. And I know exactly what he is.*

Blake stopped his approach and swung his attention back to Alyssa. *Well, what is he?*

*Were-bear.*

*What?*

*You heard me. He's a Were-bear. I haven't seen one in ages.*

*I thought they were only a fairy tale.*

*Wolves aren't the only Were's out there you know. There are several other species roaming the world as well. All of which have been forced to go into hiding because Vampires hunt and exterminate them, too.*

Before Blake could ask anything more, Alyssa watched the outsider spin around, his attention completely focused on the darkened tree line behind him. "I need to change," he shouted. "We got company and tis not takin' a good liking to us."

And just like that he threw back his head, extended his arms and whispered some sort of prayer or chant and began changing. He didn't bother to remove his clothes, just let them tear at the seams as he changed.

The wolves, too, looked into the trees. The wind continued to howl. Twigs and branches, leaves and birds' nests flew through the air, targeting the threesome.

They held their position, waiting for the attack they knew was imminent, whether it was by a Were-wolf, a Vampire or

something else.

Alyssa heard several vehicles approaching from the opposite side of the compound and they were moving fast. They'd be pulling into the driveway in a few minutes. She knew they would be surrounded, Humans on one side and something else on the other.

As though they'd worked as a team for years, the trio separated. Blake positioned himself facing the danger coming from the trees while Alyssa stood out in the open facing the driveway and the coming Humans, waiting as bait. And just out of sight, Keenan waited, ready to jump in when things got hopping. No one knew he was even in the area, giving him the perfect opportunity to make the drop on either the Humans or the Vampire, which approached simultaneously.

Braced for battle, Alyssa stood in full view as the intruders approached. If they'd been the ones to make a mess of Blake's home, she'd be one very pissed off Were-wolf. If it weren't against all their laws, she'd be tempted to bite one, just for the satisfaction of it.

Three rusted-out Pintos chugged up the driveway before stopping in front of the communal dining room. At least fifteen teenagers unfolded themselves from the cars, all heading toward the trunk of the tail car.

With their attention riveted on whatever was in that trunk, they didn't see her a few yards away, watching them as they started dragging out their stash of beer, weed and snacks. *Ah*, she thought, *all the necessities for a great party, food, drugs, alcohol, and people*. Too bad they were going to go to waste tonight, unless they found some other place to invade. She'd be damned before she'd allow anyone to hurt Blake again, even unintentionally.

Annoyed that they hadn't noticed her, Alyssa howled, then

began barking as she ran toward the quaking teens. Then the chase was on. She growled and barked, she chased and pounced, doing anything and everything she could think of, short of hurting them, to get them to go away before all hell broke loose and the compound became a Vampire feeding ground.

She'd about reached her limit and was thinking about doing some serious damage, when a bear lumbered out of the trees, making his presence known with a ferocious roar, or maybe a growl. Hell, if she hadn't known who he was, the noise alone would have scared her witless.

More afraid of being mauled and eaten by the bear than a lone wolf, a boy, no older than twenty, piped up, "This place is crawling with wild animals, we don't want to scare them none." He said his piece as he scrambled to get back into the lead car.

*As if,* Alyssa thought.

"Besides, we can find a way better place to party," he called out the window as he started the car and gunned the motor.

As one, the rest scrambled toward their cars, leaving their provisions scattered all over the ground. The three vehicles—if one could call them that—screeched out of the compound, a thickening wall of dust ample proof that they were in a hurry to leave.

After waiting a moment to make sure they weren't brave enough to return for their supplies, Keenan and Alyssa quickly made their way over to Blake. She knew from his stance, Blake was braced for battle and looking for a damn-good fight. Keenan was of the same mind, but he moved deep into the trees again while the pair of wolves stood as bait for the approaching Vampire.

The wind stilled and small animals scurried from their homes, intent on running far from the danger they sensed. They smelled the evil one approaching. An oily thickness seemed to

swallow all of the oxygen from the air, leaving behind a dark malevolence.

*It's almost upon us, Alyssa.*

*I know that, Blake Donovan. Don't worry there's three of us here. No problemo.*

*Why do you sound so cheerful?*

*'Cause I have a feeling that after we whoop this Vampire's ass, we're going to find out just what happened here.*

*How come you're so optimistic?*

*I'm not. I just have a feeling is all. How else can you explain why Keenan was here waiting for us?* Besides, listening to Keenan's thoughts had given her some interesting information that she wasn't willing to distract Blake with, just yet.

*Well, we'll find out soon enough, Alyssa. Hold up. It's here. I'll take the frontal assault, you come at it from the rear. Okay?*

*Sounds good to me, darlin'. Luv ya.*

*Ah, I love you, too, Alyssa.*

With all the evil tainting the air, when the Vampire arrived it was a shock to realize it was a female. And she knew just how to use that shock-value to her advantage. Dressed like a twenty-dollar hooker, it took a moment for Alyssa to realize exactly what she was looking at. Heaven knew women could be just as evil as men, but that still didn't prepare you to face a female, no matter how often it happened. She may have been beautiful once, but she didn't even try to hide her decaying features behind glamour.

Except for her fangs, all of her teeth had fallen out from rot long ago. Her thin scraggly hair made her look more bald than not, even with it hanging halfway down her back. Her skin was ashen, her lips stained red from feeding off her victims, her bones prominent beneath her parchment-thin skin.

As the Vampire approached, she and Blake attacked simultaneously, leaping for her, claws extended. Their objective

wasn't to kill it outright, but to wound it enough to get some answers out of it while she weakened. Like why in the hell was she at the compound now, after everyone had already abandoned it? Was she watching the place for someone to come back? And if so, why? And, who was it? Too many questions and unfortunately, there were no answers. Yet.

Though both struck at the Vampire, she proved quicker than they expected, dodging most of the blows as if the wolves were moving in slow motion. It was taking all they had to keep moving as the Vampire went on the attack.

*Alyssa, I'm going to slow down so that she comes after me. When she does, I want you to try and catch her from behind. Do as much damage as you can, baby.*

*Count on it. But damn, she sure is hard to pin down. She jumps around like a rabbit hopped up on speed.*

The Vampire was smarter than they anticipated. Expecting the trap, she swung about and lunged for Alyssa.

Although the Vampire was swinging her around by the neck, Alyssa wasn't about to give up. This close to her, she may be able to do some serious damage before passing out. She managed to only swipe at the Vampire's arm once before she began to see stars, then everything faded to black and she felt no more.

\* \* \* \*

Enraged, Blake went ballistic. Alyssa was in deadly peril. Losing all sense of self, Blake flew into a reckless rage, not caring whether he was injured so long as Alyssa was set free. He heard Keenan roar into the battle.

Alyssa was down.

Blake lunged, clawed and bit at the Vampire. Though bleeding profusely from several wounds now, she kept fighting.

Her wounds were regenerating almost as soon as they appeared. What was he going to do? He needed to get to Alyssa, he needed answers. *The hell with it*, he thought, Alyssa was more important at the moment. They'd get their answers from Keenan.

In a rush to get to Alyssa, Blake never noticed Keenan lumber through the trees and run straight for the Vampire with a sharpened stick in his fierce and deadly jaws.

So intent on drinking a *Loup-garou's* powerful blood, the abomination never realized the approaching bear was anything but what he appeared to be. She should have been afraid rather than full of herself. Standing on its back legs, the bear snapped the Vampire's neck just as she was reached toward Blake.

Blake ran to Alyssa. Unable to hold her wolf form as she lost consciousness, she lay in a crumbled, naked heap amidst the fallen leaves. He really didn't want Keenan or any man seeing her this way. But he was really pissed that the Vampire was dead. They could have tracked her later just by following her scent.

As Blake transformed from wolf to man, Keenan plunged the stake through the Vampire's chest, straight through the heart and out her back.

Too pissed to be civilized, Blake picked up Alyssa and called out over his shoulder, "I'm taking her to where we left our things. We'll meet you back here once she's conscious to help dispose of that thing's remains. Then you're going to tell me what the fuck is going on." Blake took a few more steps and stopped. "And put on some damn clothes before my mate sees you in all your glory."

\* \* \* \*

Alyssa woke cuddled on Blake's lap, wearing nothing but his shirt and a pair of panties. He was squeezing her so hard, it was

difficult to take a deep breath. But she was just too darn sore at the moment to voice a protest. She'd rather be on his lap, safe in his arms, than anywhere else on earth.

"Oh, thank God. You're awake."

"What happened?" she asked, finally getting a good look at Blake's face. He had a gash under his right eye and his left eye was already black and blue. Even his chest was covered in gouges and bruises.

"When the Vampire captured you, I went crazy. She would have killed me if Keenan hadn't stepped in. All I could think about was getting to you. He took care of the Vampire." He sounded both disgusted with his lack of control and pissed that Keenan was forced to make the kill. "I never got the chance to question her."

"He did the right thing. Where is he anyway?"

"Hell, I know that. It doesn't make me feel any better about it though." Blake sighed, "He's waiting for us by the body."

She felt Blake's gaze roam over her.

"I guess you better get dressed so we can get rid of the remains. He says he'll answer our questions. I don't want to take the chance that he's going to take off without telling us what we need to know."

"Well, I may love being held on your lap, but now is apparently not the time." She wiggled off his lap and began putting on her clothes, handing Blake back his shirt. Walking hand in hand, they headed back to Keenan and the dead Vampire.

Keenan stood over the corpse, his gaze thoughtful. He turned to them as they approached. "I'm sorry you didn't get any answers from her. But I think I can point you in the right direction."

"Why are you here?" Blake snapped.

“Look! Don’t take your temper out on me. I just saved your sorry hides.”

“Listen to what he has to say, Blake.” She knew how angry Blake was, he was seething inside. Knowing that Keenan had had no choice but to step in and kill the Vampire didn’t ease his anger at not getting the answers he wanted. “He must have waited around for a reason.”

“*Aye*, listen to your woman. I had nothing to do with what’s going on here, but I *do* know why this crap is happening.”

“Well, what the hell is it then?” Blake growled.

“I think I better show you instead. Then I’ll answer any questions you may have...if I can.”

Blake nodded begrudgingly, then grabbed Alyssa’s hand. She gave him a reassuring squeeze as they followed Keenan through the woodland.



## Chapter Eleven

It took just a few minutes for Blake to realize just where Keenan was taking them. Whatever it was that Keenan was going to show him, it couldn't be good because they were heading straight for the cliffs.

For such a big man, Keenan's voice was somber as he spoke. "This is what brought me here. My brother's scent is all over this area. I'd heard a rumor that he was coming here. I didn't know then why he was coming, but he'd been secretive lately, acting strangely, even for him."

Blake could tell that what Keenan was telling them tore the gentle giant apart so he bit his tongue. He would let Keenan tell him what he needed to without interruption.

"We hardly ever saw him, and when we did, he'd make some excuse to leave. I knew he was up to something. I should have followed him right away. But there was clan business you see...I'm the elder. I had to stay behind." His voice wavered. The big man was nearly in tears.

Whatever happened, he blamed himself. Blake would make his own decision as to whether Keenan was at fault or not.

"It'd been more than a week before we realized he'd disappeared, and that no one had seen him around. I was worried. I sent my best trackers to hunt him down. It took them

nearly three weeks to follow his trail.”

Keenan paused, shaking his head in despair. “They arrived here, found your compound abandoned and in shambles and sent for me. There was evil here, they said, and I was afraid my brother was at the center of it, so I came.” Keenan swallowed. “I was right,” he admitted boldly.

Blake began to stir, angry with this man, knowing it wasn’t his fault, but pissed anyway. He felt Alyssa’s hand gently running up and down his arm, barely there, but comforting all the same. He was able to reign in his temper, to keep his head.

Keenan lifted his head, anger now blazing red in his eyes. “I will hunt Roland down, you can count on it. But you deserve justice as well and I’m afraid you’re already in the game.”

“What do you mean?” Alyssa asked.

Blake shifted then, speaking up for the first time since realizing where they were heading. “My mother. She’s part of this now. Isn’t she?”

“I believe so, yes. Follow me and I’ll show you what I found when I arrived this morning.”

They followed an overgrown path that skirted the cliffs, then led into the trees, away from the compound. Blake knew this path all too well. “We’re heading toward my cabin,” he whispered to Alyssa. With his hearing, Blake knew Keenan could hear them, but he needed this contact with Alyssa. He needed to hear her voice, feel her reassurance as she gently squeezed his hand. It gave him courage to face whatever waited for him.

“Stay strong, we can handle anything together.”

Keenan was speaking again, “So I followed his scent from the edge of the compound to the cliffs, then out here.”

They stopped in front of a picturesque log cabin, all glass front, homey except for what waited in the doorway for them. Hanging between the sides of the doorway was what was left of a

child, wrapped in a bloody sheet that had long ago dried to a rusty brown. It was covered in dirt as though buried, then dug up for maximum shock value.

Alyssa and Blake stared at the hideous sight, vomit clogging their throats, their hearts in shreds.

Keenan cleared his throat, swallowed convulsively several times before going on. "There's more, a note, nailed above the body. It's addressed to Donovan. I'm assuming that's you," Keenan asked, turning toward Blake.

"You read it?" Blake asked as he moved forward to rip it off the nail head, but he wasn't expecting an answer, he already knew Keenan had. If it'd been his brother involved, he would have read it to know, no matter who it was addressed to. After a few moments of silence, Blake turned his bleak eyes on Alyssa. "It's a ransom note," he whispered.

"What? Ransom? What in the hell is that all about?" Why hold a Were-wolf hostage. It'd never been done before. Something was obviously hokey with the whole situation. "What are they asking for?" she demanded. She grabbed the note from Blake's trembling hand. Reading it over for herself.

Keenan answered her. "My brother and whoever, or whatever, that's working with him, want an ancient book of Magick. According to legend it was given to the *Loup-garou* to hide, but that was nearly a millennia ago, during the dark ages and subsequent persecutions. It could be anywhere now, if it even still exists."

"What's so important about this book? What's in it that's worth mauling a little girl and stealing an old woman for?" Blake demanded.

"And how can we find it by the deadline. It says we have only until Midsummer's eve. That's just a couple of weeks away, isn't it, toward the end of June, right?" Alyssa asked.

"It's on or around June 21st, the summer solstice or during pagan times, midsummer's eve was the night of June 23rd." Keenan answered.

"I don't even want to know how you know that. At least, not right this minute. Maybe a little later though. So we have a two-day window to make the exchange."

Keenan shook his head. "Back to your question, Blake. A powerful druid named Tadc wrote the *Book of Spells*. Among the spells, there is one, that if cast, would control all shape shifters. We have no way to fight such a spell, at least not yet. I don't need to tell you what will happen if anyone, Human, Were-being, or Vampire were to actually use such a spell on us."

"It would be devastating. We'd never survive." Alyssa's voice trembled.

Blake felt her terror and it magnified his own.

The stars twinkled overhead, the night birds had returned following the extermination of evil and sang to each other and the wind was warm and refreshing, yet the beauty was lost to the three standing talking amongst themselves in front of Blake's cabin.

"What made you think the book was in the hands of the *Loup-garou*?" Blake asked, his confusion obvious. He doubted even their leader, Sam, knew that the book existed, never mind that it had supposedly been in their keeping for over a thousand years.

"Nearly a year ago, our clan came under attack. Several Vampires had banded together, but we managed to capture one so we could find out who led them to us and the rest were destroyed. My brother was the one who interrogated the creature."

"I think I see where this is going," Blake grumbled.

"I wish that at the time, I'd been able to see where it was leading," Keenan sneered. "In hindsight, I would have never left

him alone with him. All I can surmise is that he was seduced by what he learned. If he isn't already Vampire, he has the potential to be. Either way, I'll be forced to destroy my twin."

"Your twin?" Alyssa gasped.

"Had he been born first, he would be leading the clan, instead of me. Perhaps that's why he's hunting for this book. He believes he'll finally have the power he feels should have been his. I just don't know."

Blake cleared his throat, intent on getting the rest of the tale from Keenan before they went off on another tangent. "So did you learn anything else from the Vampire you captured?"

"Only that they were to attack our clan as a group, and if captured, to say nothing other than that they were looking for this *Book of Spells*. For what it's worth, I think they were looking for someone who'd want power enough to lead them straight to the book once it had been found. They found that person in my brother. I don't know what else was said in the interrogation, only that my brother left within forty-eight hours after making his report. Maybe he was in on it all along. I just don't know anymore."

"Why would they pick a Were-bear if they thought we had the book? Why not look for a rogue Were-wolf instead? It just doesn't make sense to me, Keenan."

"There is something you don't know about our clan, Alyssa. Tadc not only wrote the *Book of Spells*, he was kin. Our clan practices the old ways, using Magick. For all I know, the spell might only work for someone who has the blood of a druid running through his veins."

"If he was kin, how did the book leave your clan's keeping?" Blake queried.

"I've no idea, but wherever it is, the person who has the book has absolute control over all our kind, leaving not only shape

shifters, but Humans unprotected as well. We can't let that happen."

"And, we damn-well won't." It was a promise, a vow.

After a moment Alyssa asked, "So, what made them think Blake had the book or that it was here at the compound?"

"I don't know. The prisoner must have told Roland that while they were alone. I tracked him here by hacking into airline databases, car rental agencies, credit card purchases and ATM withdrawals. It took a while. None of our people have those skills and we had to be careful who we hired."

Alyssa eyed Keenan curiously.

Blake loved how tenacious she was.

"How did you track him here, to the compound, I mean?"

"We're not an ignorant people. Yours may have grown up believing our people are just myths, but we've always known about you. It was easy to figure out where your compounds are, especially as we know there's an underground transport stop just down the road in Monterey. Believe it or not, we live very similar."

"And where do you live, Keenan?" Blake's voice wasn't antagonistic like it had been and he was sorry for his gruffness earlier.

"My clan lives in Alaska. We're able to stay isolated there, less chance of someone becoming suspicious. And there are so many bears there naturally that we fit right in. It's a perfect location for us. At least, it was before the attack four weeks ago."

"Well, we understand that, Blake, don't we? We've had two of our *secret locations* attacked in the last few months. And those are just the ones we know of."

Keenan nodded, obviously aware of both attacks. "We have no choice but to keep informed. It's not that we're spying, it's just that we're all in danger after all."

"Enough with all the talking right now," Alyssa broke in. "There's a poor little girl who's been mutilated, hanging in your doorway, Blake. We have to take care of her."

Blake looked over at Keenan, who nodded in agreement. "She's right. We'll finish this conversation after we take care of the wee one."

Solemnly the two men walked up to the crucified girl, and with dignity and honor, removed the nails that had been pinning her wrists to the doorway. Gingerly, they caught her decayed corpse, still wrapped in the bloody sheet, and carried her to the funeral pyre just on the outskirts of the compound.

After a quiet prayer, Blake lit the kindling. He, Alyssa and Keenan honored her memory by watching the flames as they released her soul to heaven. When there was nothing left to do but scatter her ashes into the ocean, the trio headed toward the cliffs, each lost in their own thoughts. After her ashes were released, they headed back toward the compound to finish their conversation.

Blake shuddered as he looked at the destruction of his childhood home. He'd been born in this compound, raised here by his mother, taught by other *Loup-garou* and played with his friends in these same woods. Someone would pay...and pay dearly.

"You said you could track your brother's scent, right?" Blake asked.

Keenan nodded. "Aye, I can."

Alyssa, smiling at Blake, asked, "Can you tell if he's still in the general area?" she asked.

"No, what I'm picking up is at least a couple of days old, maybe day before yesterday, yesterday at the earliest."

Blake bowed his head, expecting the answer before he received it. "If we're going to find this book, then our people are

going to have to call a gathering of the elders. Sam seeks every pack's input before making a final decision on how to proceed."

"I'd do the same thing if I was leading all of the bear clans. Thank fate I only have to worry about my own most of the time," Keenan exclaimed.

"We were going to stay here at the compound tonight, but I've changed my mind, Blake. Would you mind staying at the motel you mentioned earlier?"

"It's a pretty nice motel for the price. It's where I've been staying," Keenan piped up.

Blake's voice turned warm and intimate. "If that's what you want, Alyssa, the motel is fine with me. Besides that will give me a chance to call Sam tonight." Turning toward Keenan, Blake added, "We'll fill you in on the plan in the morning." He hesitated a moment before adding, "You will still be in town in the morning, won't you?"

"You have to ask? We need to find that book, put it somewhere where no one will find it and capture my brother for being not only a traitor, but the great possibility that he's become the monster we fight every day of our lives just to survive. I'll be here." After his tirade, Keenan quickly stomped away.

Blake would have been amused if he didn't have so much on his mind. First things first, Alyssa was looking a bit peaked. It was time to get her to a bed where she could rest. Then he'd call Sam and fill him in.

He ushered Alyssa over to the borrowed Mercedes that he'd parked behind the farthest cabin in the compound when they'd arrived. After reaching over and fastening her seatbelt, he gave her a chaste peck on the lips, then slipped behind the wheel. "We'll be at the motel before you know it," he promised. When he didn't get a response, he looked over at her. She'd already fallen asleep.



She'd been such a trooper this evening. She was absolutely perfect for him and after she'd had some rest, he was going to show her how much she meant to him in as many ways as her body could handle.

He drove to the motel in silence, lost in his thoughts. He was worried about his mother, whether she'd have to be destroyed when he finally found her. He was anxious about locating this supposed *Book of Spells* and how was he going to protect it from ever being used without destroying it. One day the spells in that book might somehow save all shape shifters from the Vampires roaming the world, all of whom were bent on Human domination.

And he couldn't keep his mind off Alyssa, the possibility that she could already be carrying his child, the fact that she wanted to be carrying his child. It was hell on his concentration, never mind that it was driving him nuts not to be able to pull over on to the side of the road and mate with her now.

They pulled up at the motel just as Keenan was going into room 106 on the ground floor. Hopefully one of the rooms on either side would be vacant.

Alyssa was still asleep when he returned with the key to room 105. After unlocking the door and making sure the room was empty, he went back to the car and carried her inside.

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, he stripped her naked, but this time all he did was tuck her into bed. After she'd had a little rest, he'd wake her up to eat and take a shower. Speaking of showers, he might as well take his now, then make that phone call.

He'd only been standing under the spray a minute when Alyssa joined him, pressing her chest flat against his back. He was so surprised by the move, he actually dropped the little motel room soap they provided in the room. What a cliché.

Blake's tongue felt about as thick as molasses, "I, um...I dropped the soap."

"Well then, pick it up," she purred.

Blake swallowed, too interested to see what her next move was going to be to respond verbally. He just did what she'd demanded and bent over, searching for the miniscule bar of generic soap, but not before tuning into her thoughts through their bond.

*Ahh...God, she thought, his ass is perfect. I just can't help myself.*

Before he could react, she ran her fingers down the crack of his ass, around his buns and then finally grasped his scrotum. Blake almost jumped a foot in the air, once again dropping the soap.

*Alyssa chuckled. I like seeing him unbalanced this way.*

It was impossible for Blake to move, never mind breathe. He was so hard and ready for her, thought he'd scream if he didn't enter her soon. When Alyssa wrapped her arms around Blake's waist, resting her head against his back, Blake whirled around, picked her up and pinned her against the shower wall. Before she could even catch her breath, he ravaged her mouth, his hands roaming over her breasts, her waist and belly, until finally he cupped the heat between her legs.

He inserted one finger, then two, preparing her for his entry. She was already creaming for him. In the next instant he was buried so deep inside her, touching her womb, where tonight, if not already there, his child would begin growing. It took only a few strokes before they were both screaming in absolute bliss. After catching his breath and letting his heartbeat slow down to normal Blake let Alyssa slide down his body.

After quickly retrieving the even smaller bar of soap and washing each other, Blake carried her to their bed, still wet,

intent on licking every drop of moisture from her body. Several hours of lovemaking later, they were both completely sated and Alyssa had finally fallen into an exhausted and much needed slumber. Only then did Blake get dressed and make the phone call he'd been dreading.

Sam picked up on the second ring.

"We've got a major problem, Sam."

## Chapter Twelve

“What’s up, Blake? Did you find your mother?” Sam asked, worry evident in his tone.

Blake filled him in on what he’d discovered at the compound, leaving nothing out, including the presence of the Were-bear, Keenan, who presently occupied the room next door.

“I’d like to meet him before the elders arrive. It may take a day or two for all of them to get here. Can you three fly into JFK and I’ll pick you up? I’d rather not bring Keenan up to our cabin until I get a better feel for him. Can we use your place?”

“Sure, not a problem. I probably won’t keep it for long anyway. Alyssa needs to be near her shop in New Jersey so we’ll find a house out that way, someplace with a little bit of property.”

“I’m happy to hear something good has come out of all this, my friend.”

“Speaking of which, my mate is waking up. We’ll try and catch a flight out tomorrow. I’ll give you the flight details in the morning.”

“Talk to you then. I don’t have to tell you to be careful, do I?”

“No, Sam. Careful is my middle name.”

“You don’t have a middle name.” Sam hung up the phone snickering.

Blake was still shaking his head when he looked over at

Alyssa. She looked sexy and tousled and very well loved. Perhaps he'd keep her that way the entire night so she'd sleep on the flight tomorrow. It sounded like a plan to him.

"Come back to bed, Blake."

Her voice was husky, sleepy and way too seductive for his peace of mind. If he wasn't already primed to mate with her again, her voice would have done it for him. He didn't need to be told twice, he stripped off his jeans in record speed and slipped beneath the covers with Alyssa.

She nestled right against him, laying her head over his beating heart and tossed her leg over his thigh, just missing his rock hard cock by less than an inch. Once again she was sound asleep. Ignoring his hard-on, he cuddled her even closer to him, wrapping his arms completely around her and drifted off to sleep, content with holding Alyssa safely within his arms.

Blake awoke with a weight pinning him to his bed, that was his first thought. Then he noticed the silky slide of Alyssa's tongue descending down his torso, circling his nipples, then dipping into his bellybutton. He knew exactly where she was headed, but he wanted to be inside her...now.

Without any seductive touches or foreplay he rolled them over and slid inside Alyssa's welcoming heat. She was so tight and fit him so perfectly, he thought if he closed his eyes he'd see fireworks, the pleasure was so intense.

She was gripping him with her vaginal muscles, tightening around his cock so snugly he was forced to clench his teeth before he erupted. He would not come before making sure she found her release first. He wouldn't allow that to happen, not tonight. Not ever if he could help it. His woman deserved all the pleasure he could bestow upon her.

He made love to her slowly, thoroughly, until she'd reached her climax twice before rolling her over to her hands and knees

and entering her from behind as the wolf in him demanded. Still in heat, Blake was determined to make sure Alyssa was pregnant with their child, meaning he needed to be in the dominant position, male crouched over and behind the female, for the impregnation to work.

Alyssa went wild beneath him, as he covered her from behind. He held her still by pinning her shoulder with his teeth. She couldn't help herself, he knew that. With her heat upon her, she needed to feel him filling her. She'd tease him mercilessly by rubbing herself shamelessly against his groin until he took her like her wolf demanded.

"Please Blake, I need..."she moaned, her voice low and throaty, full of desperation.

"What do you need, baby?"

"More, I need more. Harder, please. I need you. All of you."

If she'd expected a frantic coupling, it wasn't to be. He was determined that their child be conceived in the act of love, not lust. He made love to her as though he had all night, which of course he did. Every time she'd neared her peak, he'd hold himself still until holding his beast back became impossible. Instinct took over and he sank his teeth farther into her shoulder, drawing blood as he drove his cock deeper inside her.

"Yes," she moaned as she lowered her head toward the bed and lifted her ass, allowing him to fuck her deeper, harder.

He knew exactly what she wanted. In this new position, he touched her womb with every thrust and knew that after tonight, she'd carry his child. He felt it all the way to his soul. He thrust harder, desperate now for her to conceive. The wolf inside him had taken over, impregnating his mate uppermost in his mind.

When he felt her tightening around his cock again, he didn't hold back, letting jet after jet of cum bathe her fertile womb. Both the man and the wolf were sated, content with how tonight

had progressed. For now he could rest, until her heat called out to him again to mount her.

Closing his eyes, Blake smiled and hugged his mate to his side, not even bothering to withdraw his cock from her pussy. It felt right to sleep this way and, considering his mate had already fallen asleep in his arms, she wasn't complaining. Again, Blake smiled, then closed his eyes.

For the moment, life was good. He'd cherish this night for the rest of his life.

Several hours later, just as the sun began to rise, Blake curled himself around Alyssa and they fell into a blissful and well-contented sleep.

At ten in the morning an insistent pounding on the door rudely awakened them.

"Come on, you guys. Get your butts out of the sack. I'll be back in ten minutes," Keenan shouted gleefully.

"Oh, Lord," she whispered. "He must have heard us through the wall last night."

"Ah well, Alyssa. I'm sure it's something he's heard before."

"But it's so embarrassing," she grouched. "How am I going to face him now?"

"I don't know, but we've got nine minutes to dress and shower."

"You go first then, Blake. You talked to Sam last night. You can stall Keenan while I finish getting ready."

"Sounds like a plan." After gathering up some clean clothes and giving Alyssa a lingering kiss, Blake headed into the shower.

While Blake was showering, Alyssa called her shop, anxious to know what was happening with the family currently hiding in her secret chamber. Sebastian assured her all was well and that their new identification and passports had been delivered just a

few hours earlier. She knew that they'd be gone by the time she returned to her shop, but she wished them Godspeed and put the phone into its cradle just as Blake stepped out of the bathroom.

With faded jeans that hugged all his most impressive parts and a formfitting t-shirt that showed off his rock hard abs, he could have just stepped away from filming a Diet Pepsi commercial. And he was all hers. Knowing full well they didn't have time for where her thoughts were leading, she rushed passed Blake into the bathroom.

\* \* \* \*

Blake smiled. He smelled her creaming for him even from across the room. She wasn't in heat any longer though, so perhaps they got pregnant last night after all. He sure as hell hoped so. Keenan knocked on their door carrying a bag of donuts and three coffees, just as Blake heard the shower turn off. "She'll be out in a minute," Blake assured him.

"So? Did you talk with your leader last night?"

"Of course. Sam wants to meet you, this evening. So we have to book three seats to JFK, in New York."

Keenan rolled his eyes. "I know where JFK airport is. I may dress like a bloody lumberjack, but that's only because it gets so damn cold up there in Alaska. I've gotten used to dressing this way. Besides, we won't need airline tickets. My pilot is on standby. He'll fly us into JFK, just tell me when you're ready to go and I'll give him a call."

"I should have just assumed you had your own plane, just as we do. I've got to stop underestimating you guys."

Keenan laughed. "Aye, I guess you do at that."

"How does your clan support yourselves?" Blake asked, curious now.



"We have a mine full of fire-opals, as well as a few gold mines. We get by."

Blake laughed. "Our people have more in common than not, it seems. Most of our income comes from gold mines as well."

Keenan smiled. "Imagine that."

Blake turned as the bathroom door opened. Alyssa looked like a teenager. Her face was freshly scrubbed with just a hint of a blush on her cheekbones and her hair was simply pulled back into a ponytail. In a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, she looked just like an All-American girl next door. And she was pregnant with his child. He knew it, felt it deep in his bones.

*I think I am, too,* whispered through his mind as she easily picked up his thoughts.

And she sounded extremely pleased by the news.

*How long does the pregnancy last anyway? Two months like a wolf or nine like a Human?*

*It's more like twenty weeks for us, honey.*

*Oh...I thought I'd get to enjoy being pregnant longer.*

She sounded so disappointed. *We can always have a pack of children you know.*

Alyssa gave him a blazing smile. *I'd like that.*

"Would you two pay attention?" Keenan sounded exasperated.

How long had they been standing there communicating with each other, ignoring his presence in the room? Alyssa blushed again, recognizing how rude they'd been to Keenan. "Uh, um... sorry about that, Keenan," she stammered.

He smiled. "No problem." Turning back to Blake, Keenan asked him again, "What time would you like to take off?"

"Say an hour or so, that should give us plenty of time to tell Sam when to expect us, pack up and get to the Monterey Airport. That *is* where your plane is waiting, isn't it?"

"Aye. I'll go pack up...see you in about fifteen minutes."

“Bye. Thanks for the coffee and donuts. They smell great. Blake and I will be waiting on you.”

Although he would like nothing better than to toss Alyssa over his shoulder and have his way with her, Blake knew they were on a tight timetable. It would have to wait. “I’ll give Sam a quick call. Let him know the change in plans.”

“Okay. I’ll get us packed up while you’re doing that.”

“Thanks, Alyssa.” It took all his effort to tear his gaze off her bottom as she bent over to reorganize their bags.

It took but a few seconds to get Sam on the phone.

“Well, what time are you getting in?” he asked.

“We have a change of plans. Keenan has his own private plane and pilot. We’ll be flying into JFK. My car is already there. Why don’t you meet me at my apartment around nine tonight.”

“Are you sure you can trust this guy?” He was obviously reluctant to have one of his closest friends traveling alone with someone unknown to them.

“I’d trust him with my mate.”

“That’s plenty good enough for me. I’ll be there by nine. Beth will be coming with me. I couldn’t keep her away if I tried.”

“Perfect. It can’t get any better than both my best friend and my cousin being the first of our people that I get to introduce Alyssa to.” After closing his cell phone, Blake stared at the wall, so excited about showing off Alyssa that he was smiling like a damn fool.

While he’d been on the phone, Alyssa had crept up behind him. “Wanting to show me off, huh?”

Blake jumped as though he’d been caught doing something wrong. She sounded pleased, not put off, which could only be a good thing. He should have asked her. He was going to have to get used to compromising and sharing his everyday decisions. But she was worth it to him.

Blake and Alyssa were already outside beside their rental car when Keenan strolled out of his room, or lumbered was more like it. He was one big man and could hardly squeeze his broad shoulders through the doorframe.

Following behind Keenan's SUV, they made good time to the small airfield, arriving in plenty of time for takeoff.

"Keenan, can you ask the pilot how long the flight will be?" she asked.

Blake noticed she was already biting her lip, a sure sign of her nervousness. While they settled into the leather seats, Blake grasped Alyssa's hand and brought it up to his lips for a kiss. "Why don't you try and get some sleep. It'll help and I'll be right next to you the whole time," he promised.

By the time Keenan returned from speaking to the pilot, Alyssa was already sound asleep, surprising him at how easily she'd obeyed despite her fear of flying. That act of trust made his heart clench. As far as Blake was concerned, there was no need to tell her the flight would last a little over seven hours. She'd find out soon enough. The longer she could sleep, the less stress she'd experience in the long run.

Sitting directly across from him, Keenan had been watching as he fussed over Alyssa. He knew he was acting like a mother hen, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. What a feeling, to be so connected to another soul.

After a lengthy silence, Keenan asked, "So what were you two so silently gushing about this morning?"

"She'll probably want to tell everyone herself, but we believe she became pregnant last night."

"I could tell you for sure if you want to know."

"You can?" Blake asked, skeptical.

"I'm part Druid, remember. I just need to concentrate a moment."

After a minute of silence where Keenan was grinning like a fool, Blake had to know. “Well?”

“Shh...you don’t want to wake her up. She’s definitely going to need her rest.”

“She’s definitely pregnant then?” Blake asked even though he’d known all along.

Keenan chuckled. “Very pregnant. She’s going to give you triplets, son.”

Blake paled. He’d joked that he wanted a pack of his own, but he didn’t mean all at once. Oh lord...he better wait to tell Alyssa or leave it until she figured it out on her own. He had to swallow a couple of times.

“Do you want to know the sexes?” Keenan asked, all seriousness now.

“No, I think we’ll just let that be a surprise.” After thinking a minute, Blake spouted out the first thing that popped into his mind. “We’re going to have to have a very large house,” he muttered.

After giving Blake plenty to think about, Keenan obviously decided to catch up on some reading. He read an old copy of *The Odyssey*. But before he’d finished three pages, Blake saw him nod off. Probably a good thing. It’d been an emotional few days for him as well as he and Alyssa, it was no surprise he needed to rest. And it wasn’t over yet.

With Keenan and Alyssa sound asleep, Blake had plenty of time to think and to plan. Somehow they had to determine which line the *Book of Spells* had been given to—if it even existed and wasn’t some myth—and where it might be now.

Then they needed to figure how to track down his mother’s kidnappers before the deadline. And if that weren’t enough, their people also had to decide the best place to put the book where it would be safe until it was absolutely necessary to utilize it. All

without whoever was entrusted with it being enticed to use the book for their own gain. How were they going to find someone that would keep it safe without ever being tempted to use it?

They landed at JFK that evening just before eight o'clock Eastern Time, giving them plenty of time to reach Blake's midtown Manhattan apartment. They pulled into his parking garage just ahead of Sam. Blake's BMW looked like a child's toy compared to Sam's new Hummer. With the babies coming, he was definitely going to need another vehicle, perhaps he'd get a Navigator to carry his family around in. He'd have to look into that with the babies due in five months. While Blake had been woolgathering, Keenan and Alyssa exited the car. He better get his ass in gear before they were left to introduce themselves.

Sam was just helping Elizabeth out of their vehicle when Blake stepped over to Alyssa and put his arm around her waist. She looked like she was about to crash, she was so tired. She'd woke two hours into the flight so the adrenaline her terror produced was leaving her system and she was about to fall asleep on her feet.

Blake quickly glanced at Elizabeth, just as she was getting out of her seat, with Sam's help. She looked very pregnant, yet he knew she was only about three months along. He couldn't help himself, he had to ask, "You still have about six weeks left, don't you Bethie?"

"Five, but it seems I'm carrying twins and here I am waddling before my time."

Blake knew Alyssa was grinning, anticipating being heavy with his child. Wait until she found out just how many she was carrying, then he'd see if she'd still be all smiles. Blake was dying to tell their own pregnancy news, but he didn't want to jinx anything. "Sam, Elizabeth, this is my mate, Alyssa. And this burly

fellow is Keenan, a Were-bear and general pain-in-the butt out of Alaska.”

A good-natured flush covered Keenan’s face.

“Nice to meet the both of you,” Elizabeth gushed. “But especially you, Alyssa,” she exclaimed, then pulled Alyssa into a bone-crushing hug, despite her babies being in the way.

Sam just looked on and rolled his eyes at Blake. Elizabeth was known to cry at the drop of a hat since she’d gotten pregnant. It wouldn’t be a minute before tears started leaking out of her eyes, if Blake was any judge, and apparently, Sam agreed.

Turning to Keenan, Sam held out his hand, seemingly excited at the prospect of meeting a *mythical* Were-bear.

“Nice to meet you. Ah...what do I call you? I mean you are the King of all Were-wolves.”

Sam chuckled. “Call me Sam, everyone does. I’m not much for titles and this beautiful woman here is my mate.”

“Let’s head up to my apartment. I think Alyssa needs a chair to sit in and Beth you probably would like to get off your feet as well.”

“I’m not breakable,” Alyssa and Beth said in unison.

“Okay...” Blake smirked and glanced over at Sam, knowing that the first thing both women would do, once reaching his penthouse apartment, was kick off their shoes and curl up in a chair.

No sooner had they all found places to sit—Alyssa curled up on his lap in one of his overstuffed chairs—then Sam began to question Keenan.

It was of course the same answers Keenan had given him, but Sam had additional gifts most of their people didn’t. He could tell truth from lie. If Keenan were holding anything back, Sam would know it.

“And that’s all you know?” Sam asked.

"So far. We'd tracked Roland to the California compound yesterday where I found the girl. Blake and Alyssa showed up several hours later and we flew here this evening."

"Blake can help you continue to track Roland if you want?" Sam offered.

"I think it'd be better if my men continued to track Roland so that your people can focus on finding Blake's mother and the missing book."

Sam nodded. And Blake agreed it was a good idea. And he sensed that Keenan was in earnest even though it would mean destroying his brother in the end. But they had to find out why the Vampires were working with the Were-bear and who was in charge or they'd keep coming after the book until they got it in their hands.

"Well, before you go back to chasing your brother and his conspirators, I'd like you to meet our elders. We'll be meeting tomorrow evening at my place in the mountains. They may have more questions for you about the book itself and its history that I haven't already asked you. Then you can be back on your way, if you'd like."

"Sounds good to me. I should have some more information by tomorrow evening anyway," Keenan replied.

"It's pretty late. Why don't you all head out tomorrow morning," Blake offered. "This place has four bedrooms and a pullout couch. There's plenty of room," he added, knowing it would be an easy out for Sam to take rather than keep Elizabeth out while in her advanced state any longer than they'd already been traveling to get here tonight. It was a three-hour drive to their cabin in the woods and that didn't count the pit stops along the way.

"Thanks, Blake. I really don't like driving this late at night if I can help it." He nodded gratefully to Blake, thankful he was as

subtle as he was about the trip. Blake knew Sam doted on his wife, but she tended to be a might independent. Let her believe he was too tired to drive, this way she'd get all the rest she needed before they started out in the morning.

Blake stood, gathering Alyssa closer to him and carried her to his bedroom. "It's off to bed with you first, Alyssa," he whispered. But she was already asleep. After tucking her into bed, Blake showed his guests to their rooms before joining her. Cuddling Alyssa in his arms, his last thought was *Triplets?*



## Chapter Thirteen

*The next afternoon, Upstate NY*

Samual Woods, King of the *Loup-garou*, looked around at the people gathered in his home. If this Keenan person expected the council of elders he would meet would be all gray haired types, he was in for a surprise. Several members were younger than he was. As soon as everyone settled into their seats, Sam introduced the council members to Keenan and Alyssa.

“You know Blake and myself. Albert is the one who looks like Einstein.” He pointed to a couple across the table. “Zachary Malone and his mate Jessica own the gold mines and run a compound in Canada, Jackson Daniels is our doctor and Jessica’s brother. Mathew is the one with carrot red hair and hails from Ireland, he was already in the country, otherwise he may not have been able to be here. Victor, the gentleman in the Italian silk suit, hails from Chicago and handles our investments and Pierre is the one dressed like an artist. He’s actually an archeologist and historian.”

“It’s a real pleasure to meet all of you,” Keenan said. “I’m sure you have questions for me.”

Being an historian, Pierre was the first to voice a question. “Do you know who wrote the *Book of Spells*?”

“According to Were-bear oral history, it was written by a distant relative, Tadc, who happened to be a druid.”

“And when was that?”

“During the Dark ages. No one left in my clan can remember the exact date. Hell, we thought it was just a fairy tale.”

Pierre was on a roll now. All the other council members were listening attentively. “Does your history say anything about when the book disappeared from your clan?”

“We went through some scrolls in our vault and the last mention of the Book was in the mid-sixteen hundreds. Nothing was written except that it was handed over to the *Loup-garou* as a symbol of our commitment to work together against the Vampires swarming across the world.”

Looking across the room at the faces of his fellow council members, Albert began banging his cane on the floor to get everyone’s attention. “The questions to ask then are who our leader was in the mid-sixteen hundreds? Which pack would it have been handed down through? And why wasn’t it handed over to the next elected leader and so on?”

Sam nodded as were the others in the room, including Keenan.

“I have all the records passed down from leader to leader in a bank vault in the city. Blake, I’ll make sure you have access. You and Pierre can study them and hopefully find out who was in charge then. If we’ve never heard of the Druid’s book, then I’m sure it won’t be mentioned in the diaries.”

Sam looked around the room, everyone nodded in agreement. Well, they had the beginnings of a plan. Now, how did they go about finding the book and rescuing Jeanne before the deadline? Once those problems were solved, then he’d figure out where the book should go.

While everyone pondered why one of their own would neglect

to mention the Druid's book, Keenan's cell phone rang.

Everyone waited, avidly listening to Keenan's side of the conversation. "The plane is at JFK. It might take me several hours to get there. I want it fueled and ready for takeoff immediately though. Yeah... Thanks. Great work, Dominic." He closed the phone. "That was my contact. He's tracked Roland to Tucson, Arizona. He's in some campsite up on one of their mountains. Could someone drive me back to the city later? I need to catch up with him before he moves on."

Sam looked at Elizabeth, who nodded. "I'll get you to your plane Keenan. Everyone else, you're welcome to spend the rest of the day here or move on if that's your wish." After a moment, he continued, "Blake and Pierre you stay here, we have things to discuss when I return." Sam turned to his wife. "Elizabeth, call Peter McNally to get the copter ready. I'll be back in about an hour."

Keenan waited for him at the door, duffel bag over his shoulder, obviously in a hurry to leave.

"Don't worry. I'll have you at your plane in less than two hours," Sam promised.

"Did I hear you say something about a copter?"

"Yeah...we keep one near the house. We rent a copter for short trips when necessary. He had a search and rescue operation yesterday, which is why we drove to the city. He'll have you there in little more than an hour."

"Great. Thanks for doing this for me."

"You're not a wolf, but you're one of us. We take care of our own."

They drove the rest of the way in companionable silence, each lost in formulating their plans on how to proceed. Keenan ran toward the waiting copter when Sam yelled, "Keep in touch."

Keenan nodded and climbed into the passenger seat.

Sam looked on as it took to the air. He arrived home only to find Alyssa and Elizabeth arguing with Blake and Pierre. "What do you mean she should stay here, Blake," Elizabeth yelled.

"It's just that she doesn't need to be doing all that running around when she could be keeping you company."

"And you don't need to be driving back and forth, just to pick me up. Elizabeth and I will visit when her babies come. She knows I should be at your side through this, unless you're trying to get rid of me already."

Was that hurt Sam heard in her voice?

"Of course not. If you want to come with us, then that's what we'll do. You know I love you."

*Guilt trips work every time*, Sam thought, shaking his head. Blake hadn't been mated long enough yet to figure that out yet. Should he clue him in? Catching *the look* from Elizabeth, Sam figured he'd let Blake stumble along on his own. "I noticed most of the cars are gone. Who's still here?"

"Other than the five of us, only Jack stayed. He plans to stick around for a while and monitor your twins. He said they might come early so he wants to be on hand. So you'll have a guest for a few weeks," Blake explained.

"Not a problem. I feel better just knowing he'll be down the hall when her time comes." Turning to his mate, Sam asked her, "How are you feeling?"

"A little tired and craving some red meat. You want to grill some steaks for dinner?"

It was more demand than question. Her cravings were taken very seriously in his home, otherwise he was in the doghouse until she wasn't upset with him anymore, which, with her hormones out of whack, sometimes lasted days.

\* \* \* \*

Blake looked over at Alyssa who was watching the byplay between Sam and Elizabeth. *How are you feeling, Alyssa?*

*I'm doing all right. I've just been feeling really drained since yesterday afternoon. It must be all of the running around we've been doing that's taking its toll on me.*

*We'll have Jack check you out before we head out tomorrow.*

*Okay. Can you ask them which room will be ours and get our bags brought in? I'd like to freshen up a bit. Maybe it will perk me up.*

Blake nodded and turned to Sam who was cuddling his wife against his side.

Pierre tried to look the other way, but seemed fascinated with the relationships these two pairs had with each other. Blake was sure he was wondering what it must be like to be so connected with someone?

"Sam," Blake asked, "what room do you want us in? Alyssa wants to freshen up a bit before we eat. Maybe catch a powernap."

Taking her hostess duties seriously, Elizabeth volunteered to show them to their room. It was decorated beautifully. A sherry-colored four-poster bed dominated the room. The fabrics used in the decor were rich in color and craftsmanship. A matching bureau and set of nightstands also graced the room. All in all the room could have graced the cover of an interior design magazine pandering to interests of the rich and famous.

"It's a lovely room, Elizabeth. We'll be very comfortable here. I'm hopeless at designing interior spaces. How did you come up with all this?" Alyssa asked.

"To tell you the truth, I hired an interior decorator. No way could I have done this on my own."

While he was out getting the bags, Blake ran into Jack just

coming back from a run in the wilds. “Did you enjoy yourself, Jack?”

“Sure did. I hardly ever get the chance to run as the wolf, to chase rabbits and squirrels.”

“Can you do me a favor before we leave tomorrow?”

“Sure. You feeling all right?” Jack asked, his doctor’s hat now firmly in place. Gone were the wolf and the friend, a physician now stood in front of him.

“It’s not me, it’s Alyssa,” he assured him. “She’s pregnant and, if Keenan is right, carrying a set of triplets. I just want you to give her a physical. Make sure she’s all right. She’s been awful tired the last day or so.”

“Triplets, huh...” Jack whistled. “Sure, I’ll give her a physical whenever she feels up to it. Just let me know. I have everything here that I’ll need.”

“Thanks, Jack. I appreciate it.”

“No problem, man. That’s what friends and doctors are for. Luckily I’m both,” he joked and headed into the house.

Blake found Alyssa sound asleep on their bed when he went to set the bags inside their room. He tiptoed out of the room so as not to awaken her and headed for the game room. He’d play a little pool while Alyssa napped. Then they’d see about that physical when she awoke.

\* \* \* \*

Twenty minutes later, Alyssa woke feeling refreshed and well rested. Once dressed, she searched for Blake. She found him with Pierre in the game room, playing pool. Sam was also there, playing some sort of pinball game while Elizabeth sat in a chair, busy typing away on her laptop.

Jack was the only one missing and he entered right behind

her carrying two bags of chips and a six-pack of cola. "Ah I see we're all here and accounted for now." Jack sounded pleased. "Maybe you can put those steaks on. Hmmm..."

Sam rolled his eyes and all the men except Jack trooped out of the room, Elizabeth following right behind them.

\* \* \* \*

"Blake said that you were wanting a checkup, right?"

"If it's okay with you. I'm pretty sure I'm pregnant, but I want to make sure I'm healthy enough to carry our child."

*Hmmm...* Jack thought to himself. *So she doesn't suspect there's more than one, which would explain her excessive tiredness.* If he found out that she was carrying more than one child, he'd have to tell her. In his medical opinion, she should have all the facts. Perhaps that's why Blake wanted the physical so he wouldn't have to tell her himself. Well, he'd find out soon enough if Keenan's prediction was correct. "Well, we might as well have this done. That way we'll be finishing up just as dinner's ready."

"Okay. Where to, Doc?"

"I have a room in the back of the house converted into an examining room. Everything I need is in there." He could see her relax as he talked to her. He'd set up this room on his arrival, knowing Elizabeth's babies would be here in no time. There was a long, cushioned table, a scale and instruments everywhere. He even had an ultrasound machine and a fetal heart monitor. An impressive set up.

Handing her a cotton gown, Jack pointed her to the bathroom attached to the *office*. The guest bath didn't feel like a doctor's office, but only because Jack hadn't gotten his hands on it...yet.

After drawing some blood, he began his physical

examination. Her weight was appropriate for her height so that was good. In fact, she appeared to be in perfect health. "I'll have the lab results in a couple of hours. I have the equipment here, but it still needs to be hooked up. Go ahead and tell Blake you're perfectly healthy and that I'm running a blood test to confirm your pregnancy."

"Thanks, Doc. You've already put me at ease." And she walked out of the room.

*If Keenan's right, then you won't be at ease for long,* he thought to himself as he worked. He set up the rest of his equipment and started the blood work.

"Dinner's served," he heard Sam yell through the house a while later.

"I'll be right there," Jack yelled back, just as his computer spit out the test results. Oh yeah, she was pregnant all right. Her hormone levels were through the roof. And she was definitely carrying more than one child.

Jack seated himself on the other side of Alyssa and spoke to her softly, unsure whether she'd told anybody her suspicions about being pregnant. He wasn't about to break patient confidentiality. "I have the results of your physical. See me after dinner."

She looked startled to have the results so quickly and started worrying her bottom lip with her teeth.

He had to set her at ease. "Everything is fine." And then he smiled.

\* \* \* \*

Dinner was a boisterous affair. It sounded like an army was seated at the table rather than six people. Alyssa got to hear about Sam and Blake's misspent youth while they spent summers



with the Malone's. From what she gathered, the Malone family had sponsored fatherless boys for many years, to prepare them for the change at puberty and their duties as hunters once they reach adulthood.

After she and Blake cleared the table and stacked the dishwasher, Alyssa went in search of Jack, anxious for her results. She found the Doc sitting in a glider on the wraparound porch, enjoying the evening breeze. She joined him on the glider and closed her eyes, letting the warm breeze caress her face. Crickets chirped in the distance and an owl hooted from a nearby tree. The night was perfect. Unable to wait any longer, Alyssa asked the question uppermost in her mind. Blake would be coming for her soon to go to bed and she wanted to be able to tell him if she were pregnant or not. "Well, am I going to be a mother?"

"Yes. But there's something you should know right away. I won't leave you in suspense, like I said it isn't bad news. You're carrying more than one child. By the hormone levels in your blood, you're at least carrying twins, but most likely, you're pregnant with triplets. I'll know for sure just how many when we do an ultrasound in about 6 weeks."

Alyssa swallowed several times, choking on her saliva. "Triplets?" She needed to make sure she wasn't hearing things.

"In my medical opinion, yes, triplets."

Alyssa didn't know what to say. What do you say when you find out you're going to have three babies to care for at once? Dear God, what was carrying three babies going to feel like? She would get fat—so very fat—over the next twenty weeks. "Thanks, Doc. Thanks for rushing the tests and stuff. Blake will be looking for me and it appears that I have some mighty interesting news to give him."

"No problem. I'll want to see you every couple weeks during

your pregnancy. After Elizabeth delivers, I'll be moving in with you guys. With triplets you have to be even more cautious than Elizabeth's been with her twins. We can expect them to be premature."

"We'll be at every appointment you request, Doc. These babies mean everything to us."

Jack nodded.

Alyssa had just stepped inside the house when Blake spotted her.

"Hi, baby. Did you talk with Jack?"

"Oh yeah. Have I got news for you. Let's get ready for bed and I'll tell you all about it."

"Okay. You're sure everything's all right?" He seemed a bit nervous. Hell, he was going to be even more so, with her news.

"That depends on how you feel about my news."

By now they'd already shut themselves in their room and, as though they weren't discussing their future, she grabbed her toiletries and walked into the bathroom. A moment later, she started the shower.

Alyssa heard Blake enter the bathroom, heard his clothes rustle and knew he'd be joining her momentarily. She was so happy about her babies, she wanted to celebrate by making love to her man. Sure, she'd been a mite nervous when she first heard the news, but she'd always wanted a big family since she'd lost all of hers as a child.

And as they made love in the shower Alyssa whispered her news and the joy on Blake's face was all the comfort she needed. Everything would be all right. They'd be together to face the challenges of having three little ones to contend with at once.

\* \* \* \*

Bright and early Monday morning found Blake, Alyssa and Pierre back in New York City at the Chase Manhattan bank on Broadway. Sam had several safe deposit boxes they'd been authorized to access. Hopefully the Diaries would be dated so they would only need to carry out a few of them.

Each diary was about four inches thick, some were bound parchment and others were leather-bound journals. After about an hour, they'd narrowed them down to three, an easy enough number to remove from the bank without notice. With their preternatural strength it would have looked odd if they carted out all the journals for study.

They walked two blocks to where Blake parked the car, each anxious to get home to see what they could discover. Actually, more like what Pierre could discover since he was the historian. It was his job to go through the journals and make history come alive for them.

After battling wall-to-wall taxis and anxious tourists crossing the streets wherever they pleased, Blake finally managed to make it to back to his apartment. He and Alyssa sat on the living room floor playing a game of Checkers to pass the time while Pierre painstakingly read through the diaries, starting in the early fifteen hundreds and up through the middle seventeen hundreds.

Starting with the oldest book first, Pierre read from cover to cover and reported no mention of either the book or who'd been in charge during the time in question. While in the middle of the second book, Pierre hit pay dirt and let out a triumphant whoop.

Their game forgotten, Blake and Alyssa rushed to his side, and after reading the same passage that had Pierre so excited, Blake called Sam with the information.

## Chapter Fourteen

“We found it,” Blake told Sam.

“I’m assuming you mean the name of the pack we’re looking for?” Sam asked.

“More than that. We found a passage about the treaty. I’ll read it to you verbatim. *Paris, June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1656, The treaty has been signed. Were-bears, Were-cats and Were-wolves have joined forces to defeat our common enemy the Vampire. Will this be our salvation or our downfall? May God have mercy on our souls. –Desjardin.* Did you get all that, Sam?”

“Were-cats?” Sam uttered.

“Yeah, but did you see the significance of the date. The treaty was signed on Midsummer’s Eve, the same day Roland demanded the *Book of Spells*. The date must be an important element of the spell he wants to cast.”

“I think you’re right about that, Blake. Well, now we have a name. Next step is to find out what happened to them, where they are now and what they did with the book.”

“I’ll have one of my contacts get right on that. Have you heard anything from Keenan since he left Saturday?”

“No. But I expect we’ll hear something from him soon. I gotta go, Elizabeth is busy nesting. If I don’t distract her she’ll work herself until she’s exhausted.”

"I'll call you when I have more information for you. Oh, by the way Alyssa's pregnant." After a short pause to catch his breath, he continued, "With triplets."

"Good God, man."

From the shock in Sam's voice he was stunned. He would understand the implications. Not only was the pregnancy high risk, she couldn't change into a wolf again until after the babies came and she couldn't risk her safety or that of their children to fight at Blake's side.

"Well, Jack will keep a close eye on her. We'll send him down after the babies are born and given a clean bill of health. Your job will be more difficult. She isn't going to like being left behind when it comes time for the exchange. But hopefully, we'll find Jeanne way before then. Congrats, my friend. I can't wait to tell Elizabeth your news. Gotta run, talk to you later."

As soon as he hung up with Sam, Blake dialed his contact, Jimmy, again. Now he had a name. At the very least, it was a place to start.

Jimmy answered on the first ring. "Mathias, here."

"Hey, Jimmy, it's Blake. Drop the other investigations for now. This is high priority."

"You know it'll cost ya some big bucks, right?"

"Money isn't a factor. I need the information day before yesterday."

"Okay, shoot...what's the name?"

"All I have is a last name. Desjardin, they can be traced back to the sixteen hundreds maybe longer. You'll know when you find the right one."

"Sure thing. I'll get right on it. All the way back to the sixteen hundreds, huh. Where'd they originate?"

"Hold on a minute." Blake covered the phone with his palm, then turned to Pierre. "Does it say anywhere in that journal

where they were at that time?”

“Yeah, France. The treaty was signed in Paris. At least that’s where the meeting took place.”

He was answering absently, too caught up in the diaries to give Blake his full attention. It didn’t matter though, that was about all the info they had. He couldn’t tell Jimmy why they were in Paris, of course, but in the long run it wouldn’t help his friend locate the Desjardin pack now.

Blake shook his head, he should have remembered that from the journal entry. “I know the family was in Paris on June 23<sup>rd</sup> of 1656. That’s all I can tell you, my friend. I’ve got nothing else.”

Blake hung up and immediately turned toward where he’d left Alyssa, surprised that she hadn’t been hovering over his shoulder. He found her sound asleep on the sofa. They’d made love long into the night and combined with her pregnancy, she must be completely exhausted.

\* \* \* \*

Sam called Blake a few hours later with news of his own.

“Donavan,” Blake answered. It was obvious that he had had to run to catch the phone. Hopefully, Sam wouldn’t ask why he’d been running. Blake doubted Alyssa would appreciate him talking about their love life.

*Thank God, Sam let it go*, was his first thought as Sam began speaking.

“I contacted a few of the council members about the name of the pack that Druid’s Book was given to. Albert remembers meeting the members of that pack once at a gathering. He can’t remember where, other than it was here in the states, but he does remember they had a son, who’d just reached puberty. This was about twenty years ago though. No one else I called had any

idea about the pack's whereabouts."

"That's actually going to make locating the pack a whole lot easier, Sam. At least we know they were living here in the states. We can track them that way, using social security numbers and passports. You know the process, I've done it often enough for you when you're wanting me to investigate people. I'll get Jimmy right on it."

With business taken care of, Sam smiled. "So, how's Alyssa this evening?" Sam chuckled when Blake quickly disconnected the call without answering.

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy called the next morning. "G'morning, Blake."

"Hey, Jimmy. You got something for me?"

"You know me. Would I be calling you if I didn't?"

"True. So what have you found?"

"Well, here's what I got so far. Amy and Boden Desjardin, and their son, Beau, all received new social security numbers in 1972. Apparently they immigrated while she was pregnant. His card was issued six months after theirs."

"Is that as far as you've gotten?"

"Of course not. The parents stopped using their social security numbers and credit cards in 1993, but the son's history continued up until three years ago. Now, that's as far as I've gotten. I've still got to check out his credit cards, find billing addresses and the like. I'll call you when I know more."

"Thanks for the update, man. Give me a call with his last known location as soon as you can."

"You got it, boyo."

Blake turned away from the phone. Alyssa stood two feet away, staring at him as if saying, *what now*. "Alyssa, how likely is

it that Beau Desjardin passed through your station three years ago?"

"I don't remember the name. But a lot of people have come through there in the last couple of years. It's possible he would have already had a new identity when he arrived, then I wouldn't know."

"If he came through your stop, would he have left a message in one of the journals?"

"I encourage everyone to leave a message. So if he was there he may have. We'll have to read through the whole year to see if there are any messages from him. Even then, he may not have used his real name."

"That's a chance we'll have to take then. It looks like it's another road trip. When do you want to leave, Alyssa?"

"I'm fine, Blake, just a little tired. We can go as soon as we get our stuff together. I can sleep on the way down."

Blake thought about arguing with her, but he wisely kept his opinion to himself. Just because she was pregnant, didn't mean she couldn't sit in a car for a couple of hours.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan was pissed. He'd missed his brother by a matter of hours. He arrived at the campsite on Mount Lemmon, just outside of Tucson that morning, only to find out his brother had left the campground the previous night. And if that wasn't bad enough, it was only ten o'clock in the morning and it was already one hundred and five degrees. How could anyone live in this Godforsaken heat? He figured he better call Sam and let him know the situation. He'd just pulled his cell phone out of his backpack when it began to ring.

"So close, yet no cigar. Are you still trying to track me down,



Keenan? You know you can't stop this. I'll have total power, over you, our clan and every other shape shifter out there."

"You're dreaming, Roland. Do you really think after you cast the spell, that whomever you're working with will let you live? Your life is over. Either I'll destroy you or they will. The decision is yours."

The only answer Keenan received was a click as Roland disconnected the call and an eerie feeling that Roland was laughing his head off at him. His brother hadn't even stayed on the phone long enough for a trace. Which, Keenan assumed, was Roland's plan. Where the hell could he be now and how did he know Keenan was only a few hours behind him? Was he still here watching or was someone feeding him information? He had to find out and soon. A lot of lives were on the line. But first, he had to call Sam.

\* \* \* \*

Blake and Alyssa arrived back at her shop late that afternoon. If Alyssa was surprised to find her shop open for business, she didn't let on.

While a young couple browsed through the wedding sets, Sebastian stood behind the counter as though he sold high end jewelry every day.

*Does Sebastian know what he's doing?*

*His family owns some mines, mostly gold and silver, but Sebastian has always been fascinated with gems. He definitely knows what he's doing back there. More than likely, he's even increased some of your prices and is making you some extra cash.*

*Oh, good. I was expecting to take a financial hit when we left. This is a nice surprise.*

Looking up from the display case, Sebastian's eyes met Blake's and he broke out into a smile. He made his way around the counter and pulled Blake, then her into a bone-crushing hug. While holding them close, Sebastian whispered, "You just missed your friends. They left about six this morning. Oh and I cleared out of the apartment this morning. I'll be staying in the studio for a couple days if that's all right with you, Alyssa?"

It was more demand than request, but she readily agreed. If the journals revealed anything, she and Blake would leave again soon anyway.

The couple browsing through the wedding sets started for the door, looking longingly over at the display case. Obviously they found something they liked, but couldn't afford it. Well, today was their lucky day. She was celebrating, both her marriage and her pregnancy. She was going to spread some cheer. Besides, she wanted them to start their marriage out on the right track.

"I couldn't help but notice you going through the wedding bands and engagement rings. Was there something in particular that caught your eye?" she asked, just as they reached for the door.

"Is this your store, ma'am?" the girl asked.

"Yes it is. Sebastian has been running it while I've been out of town getting married myself. How about showing me what you liked and I'll make it a wedding gift to you since I feel like celebrating." The couple's gratitude was so overwhelming, Alyssa couldn't help but *overhear*.

"What do you mean, ma'am?"

"It's simple really. I'm so happy right now I could burst so I want to spread the cheer. Whatever you had your eyes on is yours. Now come over here and let me celebrate," she ordered them both.

After looking at each other, they slowly made their way back

to the counter. "We can't accept charity, ma'am. We work hard to see that we have everything we need."

"I'm sorry you feel I've insulted you. What's your name, if you don't mind my asking?"

"It's Charlie Mason, ma'am."

"Well, Mr. Mason. This is my shop and if you must pay me something we'll negotiate the price after you've made your decision. Now, what caught your eye?"

The girl stepped up to the display and pointed. "It's that one, the marquis."

"Great choice." Alyssa had to admit, the girl had good taste. It was a 2 ct. marquis diamond solitaire set in platinum. Simple in elegance and would go with every platinum band she'd designed. "Now what about wedding bands?"

Charlie spoke up, his voice thick with emotion. "We decided we just wanted plain bands, but Taylor had that look in her eye when she saw that ring with the—what do you call them? Um..." Taylor whispered in his ear. Charlie nodded. "She likes the one where the baguettes wrap around the ring. The one sitting behind the solitaire she picked."

"Ah, she has excellent taste, doesn't she? I designed these two as a set so it's a perfect choice. Now what about you, Charlie? What would you like?"

"Just a plain band that matches, ma'am. I have big fingers so it has to be kind of wide, you know."

"I know exactly what you mean." Moving down the case a little, she reached for a 6mm wide, platinum band. "Is this what you're looking for?"

"It's perfect," Taylor squealed.

Alyssa grinned. "Why don't you both try them on and see how they fit and what they look like on your hands."

Taylor wasted no time, and after the look of absolute rapture

on her face, everyone knew they weren't leaving without the rings. Charlie's ring fit perfectly.

Blake and Sebastian stood back watching her, she could hear them mumbling to each other, probably betting how much she would charge the young couple.

"So how much were you willing to spend before I talked you into staying?" she asked them.

"We've saved up about \$750.00 so far, ma'am."

"Please call me Alyssa. Tell you what. I'll accept \$150.00 since you won't accept them as a gift. These are some of my early pieces and not worth as much as some I've designed in the last few years. I would have given them away eventually anyway." Could they tell she was lying through her teeth? She sure as hell hoped not. These rings were fated for them and she knew it. And she'd say whatever she needed to in order for them to walk out the door with them.

"\$150.00?" Charlie asked, his voice was heavy with suspicion.

Alyssa just smiled and looked over at Blake and Sebastian who were beaming at her, their smiles so wide and bright. Their pearly whites, two beacons shining through the darkness. Now she was waxing poetic, so unlike her. "Well you can take it or leave it, but you won't find a better deal."

Taylor answered for them. "We'll take it." Then she kicked Charlie in the shin to make sure he didn't argue. He just looked down at Taylor and smiled.

Alyssa looked at the pair. The love she saw between them was breathtaking. Yes, their marriage and coming here was definitely fated. "Well, let's get these wrapped up then." Both were reluctant to remove their rings and Alyssa smiled. She was doing the right thing, she knew it.

After the payment had been made and the pair left her shop, Blake took her in his arms and kissed her soundly, right there in

front of Sebastian.

"So congratulations are in order, hmmm..." Sebastian asked.

"For several things actually."

"Well, do tell."

"While we were away, we spoke our vows, then to top it all off we're already pregnant." Before Sebastian could find his voice, Blake added, "With triplets."

Sebastian's eyes crossed. "Oh my. That is some bit of news." Serious all of a sudden, Sebastian strolled over to Alyssa and pulled her into his arms. "I wish you much luck and happiness. I hope one day to find the same happiness you're now experiencing."

"You'll find her, Sebastian. We've no doubt about that."

"I hope you're right," he whispered. Collecting himself, he headed toward the secret chamber, calling over his shoulder, "Come down when you're ready to tackle the journals and I'll help. I want to go through them anyway."

Alyssa and Blake ate a quick lunch then made their way down to the chamber. She knew they'd find something important today, and from Blake's hurried pace, so did he. She couldn't wait. What dire secrets lay buried in those dusty old volumes?

## *Chapter Fifteen*

Sebastian was sitting at the table, chomping on a ham and Cheese sandwich, staring off into space when the pair came downstairs to the hidden chamber. When they sat down at the table with him, Sebastian cleared his throat. "Before we get down to searching the journals, we have other things to discuss."

"Any trouble while we were gone?" Alyssa asked.

"The first night, someone tried to break out the front window. Needless to say, he didn't get to throw it. After what you'd told me, I was waiting in the shadows, near the stairs leading up to the apartment. All I got out of him was that Monica sent him to do a job. I told him not to bother since you weren't even here. That I'd be watching. So I was planning on sticking around a few days. Besides, I want to have some fun, too, Blake."

Blake laughed. "Well, then, how about you join me when I go have a talk with her tomorrow morning?"

"I'd love to go with you big macho men," Alyssa said rubbing her stomach, "but me and the babes better stay behind on this one."

"Sounds like a plan to me." After washing his hands, Sebastian turned toward the wall covered in shelves that were holding dozens of journals. "Well, let's see if we can find the information you're looking for. What year do we need?" he

asked.

"2005. We're looking for an entry from Beau Desjardin."

"Don't sound so dispirited, Blake," said Alyssa, "at least it's something to look for. We're not at a dead-end yet."

"How are they organized?" asked Sebastian.

"They're not—not really. There isn't a book for every year, they just blend from one entry to the next as people come through."

"So the best method is for one person to start at the beginning, one in the middle and one at the end until we find the right year." Having not thought about it before, Sebastian suggested, "Perhaps we can find the parents in here when they came into the country. The underground does move both ways, doesn't it?" he asked her.

"You're right, it does. I hadn't even thought about how they got into this country. At some point the Desjardins left France and made their way over here to the U.S."

"So we have to look in every journal. All right." The task seemed monumental to Sebastian, like finding a tiny needle in a very large mountain of hay. "Let's get to it."

Blake took the top three shelves, Alyssa took the middle three and Sebastian took the last three. It only took a moment for Sebastian to realize they needed Pierre's help. Some of these entries were written in Old English, French and whatever else.

"Blake, give Pierre a call. We'll need his help here, I think. Some of what's in these earlier journals I can't understand."

"Good idea, Sebastian," Alyssa agreed, already lost within the pages of the first journal she'd picked up. "This one starts in the 1920's," she muttered. "Too early for Beau's parents and way too late for the original Desjardin who got the Book during the treaty signing."

They'd been looking through the journals for three hours

when Sebastian yelled in excitement. "You're both not going to believe what I just found."

Blake and Alyssa just looked at each other, looking amazed at his obvious joy. "Well, what have you got?"

"Blake, remember coming down here originally, so you could find word about Samantha?"

"Of course."

"I just found it, she was here in 1985 when she was thirteen years old. You've both got to read this entry. And we've got to tell Sam. We finally have a lead. After all this time we have proof she didn't die with her parents."

Sebastian thought about Sam, he was going to be so happy for some kind of news. He was raised as a brother to Sam and they were very close. Sebastian watched Blake take Alyssa's hand and walk toward the sofa. "Let's move this to the couch and you can read to us exactly what she had to say."

*"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 the one at 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."*

Alyssa was crying, as Sebastian's voice trailed off.

Sebastian looked up into Blake's glittering eyes. "Let me call Sam, Blake. I need to do this for my brother. I need to find her. I'm meant to, I know I am. I have to follow this, Blake."

"I understand. Give him a call. Do you want to be left alone?"

"No, I'm glad you were here. Stay."

\* \* \* \*

After pulling out his cell phone, Sebastian quickly dialed Sam's number.

"Hey, Bas. What's up?"

"I've got news for you. You better sit down. I found an entry in Alyssa's journals from your sister. It's from a week after your parents were killed." There was silence from Sam's side of the line. He knew Sam was crying, but they were tears of joy.

"What's it say?"

"Why don't I fax a copy to you? You can share it with Elizabeth."

"Thanks. Thanks, Bas. You're going to send it right now?"

"Yeah, you'll have it in a couple of minutes. After you read it, call me. I need to be the one to go after her. I've got the time and I know it's something I'm meant to do."

"We'll talk after..." Sam quietly hung up his phone.

"I think we need to go out and celebrate the great news. Let's

go to the boardwalk and get some food. Maybe sit for a while and enjoy the beach for a bit,” Blake suggested.

“And don’t forget your phone, Sebastian.”

“Thanks, Alyssa. But it’s not leaving my sight until Sam calls. Let’s go up to your office and copy this page so I can fax it over to Sam before he calls us looking for it.”

“If Sam asks my opinion, I’ll tell him you’re the best one to be looking for her,” Blake promised. “Besides, Pierre will be here when we have to leave again.”

They were in the middle of sending the fax when Blake swore. “Ah, hell. I still need to call Pierre.”

“He must be out,” Blake told them and left a message for Pierre to call him as soon as he got the message. “Let’s go eat...”

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian’s phone rang thirty minutes later, while he was stuffing a hotdog down his gullet. He gulped down the remainder, then answered the phone.

“Bas, I can’t thank you enough for finding this. Do you still insist on being the one to go for her? I’d do it, but Beth is too far along to be traveling right now. And I won’t leave her.”

“I insist on making the trip. I have to. My mate is near her, I feel it, Sam.”

“Then you have to be the one to go because only you will recognize her. I’ve got to find someone to cover for you there.”

“Blake’s already figured that out. We need Pierre to come down tomorrow to help translate some of these older journals. With his family in Canada at the compound there, he’s free to stay here. Besides, he’ll get a kick at looking through all the history here. Maybe he’ll locate some more of our people through these

books. Some of the refugees have included their new names, so that will help.”

“I’m assuming you’re leaving as soon as you track down the family she was sent to?” Sam asked.

“That’s my plan.”

“Then I wish you luck...with both your missions.”

“Thanks, Sam. I promise you, if your sister is alive, I’m bringing her home.”

\* \* \* \*

Pierre arrived the next morning, just after daybreak, so excited he looked like he was about to explode. He hopped from foot to foot, his hands shaking in his excitement, his voice high and happy.

Blake was bleary eyed when he opened the door, but Pierre just rushed past him, not even noticing how early in the morning it was or that he’d woken him from a sound sleep all cuddled up next to Alyssa with the intention of waking her up for a bit of marital bliss. Well, that was now shot to hell in a basket. “Come in, Pierre. Make yourself at home.”

He shouldn’t have even bothered to offer. There was no way Pierre was going to sit still long enough to get comfortable, already he paced the small living room, his hands clenched together behind him.

“I should have just come down with you yesterday. It would have saved so much time. We only have a few days left now.”

“I know,” Blake said, sighing. Just then, Alyssa, now dressed, walked into the living room, looking fresh and rosy. Damn, she took a shower without him.

“Sebastian and I have an errand to run later,” he told Pierre. “The journals are in the underground chamber. Alyssa will show

you where and what we need your help with. For now, why don't I fix us some breakfast? I'm starving. Besides, it's still too early to do what I have to do."

It was then Pierre looked at his watch. "Oh damn, I am a bit early, aren't I? I was so jazzed about looking through those books that when I couldn't sleep, I just got in my rental and drove straight here."

Alyssa did her best to reassure him that it was all right. "You know, when Blake first came here to find Samantha, he showed up at about this time, too. Don't worry about it, Pierre. Besides, we're getting a free breakfast out of the deal."

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, just as Alyssa cleared the table, Sebastian rapped on the door. "You ready to go see this Monica Delano woman now, Blake?"

"Sure just let me take a quick shower and I'll be right with you. No more than ten minutes."

Fifteen minutes later, Blake and Sebastian, headed toward Ms. Delano's residence. Although Blake appeared calm, Sebastian felt rage coming off of him in waves. Blake was truly pissed that someone was harassing Alyssa and Sebastian didn't blame him.

Ms. Delano was walking down her front steps when they hurried up to her.

She was a petite woman, blonde, but rather plain. None of her features tended to stand out. She was just an ordinary woman wearing rather expensive clothes. Perhaps her non-imposing facade was what kept her victims from catching on to her protection racket scheme.

She gasped at him and Blake as they stood towering her. She was probably wondering where her bodyguards went.

She had no way to know that they'd been knocked out five minutes earlier and weren't going to come to her rescue. More than likely those big bruisers were more than bodyguards, they were the hired thugs who were sent to ensure victims paid the protection money.

Sebastian's menacing grin was nothing. Blake looked like he wanted to pick the woman up by the throat and wring her neck.

"I want to know why you're harassing my wife, Ms. Delano."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she protested.

Blake moved even closer, his posture clearly threatening. He repeated himself. "I want to know why your hoods are harassing my wife, Alyssa."

"I would never..."

She didn't get to finish because he grabbed her by the front of her *Chennele* suit jacket and lifted her right out of her matching heels. "Let's try this again. Why are you harassing Alyssa Maguire? Why are you having thugs smash her front window a couple of times a week and why did you have an incompetent Jackass try to mug us a few days ago?"

"Look. It isn't my fault she won't fall in line. I'm not the one who wants the harassment to continue whether she pays or not," she stammered.

"Who is?" Sebastian asked, aware that Blake wouldn't lower the lady until he had all the answers he was looking for.

"I don't know, ok. I get a money order sent to me once a month for ten thousand to make sure she's kept off balance. He wants her dead, but he has a timetable set up. That's all I know, I swear," she promised,

Satisfied that he'd gotten all he was going to, Blake dropped her to the ground, forcing her to stand on wobbly legs and dust

herself off.

While they walked back to the BMW, he and Blake tried to make sense of what the Delano woman had told them. For the life of him, Sebastian couldn't figure out why anyone wanted to terrorize Alyssa. Did she have a stalker, someone who wanted to control her, use her fear or her anger? He just didn't know what to think about this new development. If he were to guess, any more harassing that Alyssa received would not come from Ms. Delano. She would high tail it out of the city before sunrise tomorrow.

\* \* \* \*

While Blake and Sebastian were confronting Ms. Delano, Alyssa and Pierre worked in the underground apartment. Pierre started right at the beginning with the journals, looking for anything related to the Druid's book or the Desjardin pack. Alyssa poured through the last fifty years worth of journals, hoping for either a note from his parents or from Beau, himself.

After about an hour of hunting, Alyssa found a promising entry from three years ago. It read, *August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2005, The answer lies in New Orleans. Look there for the book that contains the answers you're searching for. -Beau*

Alyssa was just about to tell Pierre when Blake and Sebastian walked into the room. From the look on their faces, the meeting did not go well. Well, she should be able to cheer everyone up with her discovery. "Before you tell me what you two have been up to, let me tell you about my discovery. I found exactly what we're looking for. At least I believe so. You'll need to contact your investigator though to verify it, Blake."

The three men gathered around Alyssa and read the short entry. It wasn't a definite ID, but mentioning the book made it

pretty darn likely.

\* \* \* \*

“Let me get Jimmy right on this.”

Jimmy answered on the second ring. Blake didn't offer any small talk, just jumped right in on what he needed. “Jimmy, I found some information about Beau Desjardin.”

“I was just about to call you. His last known address was in New Orleans.”

“Well, that confirmed the rumor I just heard. I have another name I need info on right away.”

“Jesus, Blake. You're going to owe me quite a few favors and a bunch of moola when this is through.”

“Yeah, I know. The name is Erica Samuels. She would have received a new social security card in July or August of 1985. She was leaving the country to head for Spain so she should also have a passport under the same name. She was thirteen at the time.”

“That's more than I had for the last one. I'll find out what I can and get back to you as soon as I come up with something.”

“You find this woman for me and my client will owe you more than a few favors.”

“I'll do my best. I'll get back with you about Ms. Samuels. Do you want me to continue tracking Mr. Desjardin?”

“No, I'll take care of that. Actually, go ahead and track him. He may have changed his identity.” After Blake ended his call, he turned to Alyssa. “Do you keep records of where you send the refugees?”

“Yes, they're locked in my safe. A few years ago I started putting them on a computer disk and I update it monthly. But the ledgers have every name that either left the U.S. or entered it from this location in the last century.”

“So as soon as we look through the ledgers, I’ll have an initial location. I’ll find her, Blake. I won’t give up until I bring her home where she belongs,” Sebastian vowed.

An hour later Sebastian was flying his plane toward his destination, Saragossa, Spain.



## Chapter Sixteen

After a quick call to Sam to bring him up to speed, Alyssa suggested contacting the New Orleans stop to find out if they had any records that Beau Desjardin ever went through there.

Although they'd never met in person, she and Alasdair Connelly spoke often through e-mail. But he was notorious for going days between checking his messages. They didn't have that kind of time. She had no choice but to do the one thing she'd sworn she'd never do, contact him over the phone. Using a calling card so as not to bring attention between the two stops, Alyssa dialed Alasdair's number.

There was a grumbled, "This better be good," then absolute silence.

Alyssa paused, uncertain how to proceed. Well, she'd had no choice but to call him and he could just deal with it. "Alasdair, this is Alyssa Maguire. I need information, and I need it yesterday. It's about one of your friends who has moved on."

"If that's the case, then I must speak to you in person. I never discuss my friends except face to face and only then if the reason is exceptional."

"My mate and I will meet you tomorrow after we arrange a flight. We'll probably arrive around dawn."

"I'll meet you at the airport. Good luck with your travels."

"You, too." A loud click sounded in her ear. Just like that, he'd hung up on her. Alyssa shook her head and turned to Blake who was waiting impatiently. "He won't talk to me over the phone or through our usual route. Whatever he has to say to me must be done in person. We have three days left to find the book. Three days."

"Don't be discouraged. We knew we'd likely have to go to New Orleans anyway."

"How can you be so calm? If we don't find that book in time, we may never get your mother back."

"Alyssa, honey, you need to face the possibility that we may never get her back anyway."

"I know, Blake. But I can hope, can't I?"

"Of course, you can. And so will I. There's always hope."

Although things looked bleak, at least they had a lead to follow. Tomorrow they'd be in New Orleans and one step closer to locating the Druid's Book. "Let me make a few calls and get us on the red-eye to New Orleans. After that we'll go to bed and get some sleep."

"Sleeping isn't all we're going to do, is it?"

Blake's smile, though slow in coming, was sexy as hell. Oh, yeah...he was primed for some heavy-duty, mind-blowing, long-lasting loving.

\* \* \* \*

A few minutes later, Blake joined her in the bedroom. The room was a stage set for seduction. Candles were spread over every surface, the bed was turned down and a slow blues song was playing softly on the radio. Those things were just at the peripheral of his vision, for his eyes were only on Alyssa.

She was standing seductively, posing, near the bed completely nude. His breath hitched. He still couldn't believe how beautiful she was. Her riotous red curls tumbled about her face and down her back, her beautiful breasts, lush and firm, her nipples already standing at attention. And legs a man wanted wrapped around his waist at every possible opportunity.

But it was her eyes that sucked him in. She looked at him with so much love shining through, love for him. No one had ever been loved so fully as she loved him. She smiled and crooked her finger for him to come to her.

As he stood there staring at her, Alyssa began to slowly tease him. Wetting one of her fingers, she began trailing it down her torso, around each breast and down her stomach, ending at the juncture of her thighs. Blake took a step forward, only to have her take a step in retreat.

Using both hands, she moved them to her breasts, lifting them up in offering and then slowly began to tweak her own nipples until they were almost painfully hard.

He could smell her heat, smell her essence pooling between her thighs. He took two more steps forward and she retreated again. With one quick lunge, he reached her and her devilish smile almost did him in.

With a low growl, Blake fisted his hands in Alyssa's hair and pulled her into his embrace. She'd teased him beyond his endurance. His mouth was ravaging hers, his tongue thrusting deep, mimicking the sexual act to come. This was no simple kiss of desire, but one of possession, of dominance, pure and simple. By God, she'd know that she was his, anytime, anywhere he desired.

His every nerve ending was on fire for her. He couldn't think. He was beyond that. All he could do was feel. Feel her curves pressed against him, her hands twined in his hair, her heart

beating rapidly in time to his. She was everywhere, beneath his skin and inside his heart.

She let go of his hair, only to rip open his shirt. Buttons flew in every direction, neither of them seemed to notice. They were immersed in a world all of their own. Focused totally on each other, on the passion, the fire, that was burning them from the inside out.

Blake gasped at the feel of her fingers raking down his chest, her nails lightly scraping across his nipples, building the fire, the need even higher and he began to tremble. His self-control was gone. He needed to take her...now.

He pulled her closer to him, trapping her hands between their bodies. His fingers roamed over her, cupping her bottom and lifting her so that she could feel exactly what she'd done to him with her teasing. "Wrap your legs around me, Alyssa" he growled.

"Blake, I need you now," she groaned.

With Alyssa in his arms, Blake staggered closer to the bed and tossed her onto it, lowering himself atop her immediately. The beast inside him was clamoring for release, his mind overcome with the wolf's instincts to mark his claim, but he had to slow down, he needed to make this last, to love her slowly and thoroughly. She deserved gentleness from Blake, not just explosive heat.

He quickly stood and jerked at the button on his jeans, ripping the zipper down and tossing his pants to the floor. He wore nothing underneath. He quickly lowered himself to her again, trailed his fingers down her body until he reached the notch between her thighs. He palmed her mound and slowly eased a finger inside her, then two, readying her for his invasion.

With a devilish grin, his mouth replaced his fingers, his tongue stroking over her, lavishing her with attention. She was

going to scream, his beast demanded it. His tongue lapped at her pussy, devouring her cream, until finally he latched onto her clit, flicking his tongue over it once, twice, three times. She came, screaming his name to the heavens.

When she would have reached down and wrapped her fingers around his rigid cock, he grabbed her hands and pulled them over her head, holding them both with just one of his, leaving her at his mercy.

Alyssa shuddered as Blake's teeth scraped her over sensitive nipples and his breath blew heat across the puckered peaks. "Blake, please," she pleaded.

"Not yet. I need more." More of her taste, her passion, her body. He needed her love, her compassion and her smiles. He just needed her.

With her hands pinned, Blake could do anything he wanted with her and he wanted to do a lot. His mouth was suckling her nipples and he could feel her pleasure spiraling her closer to the edge through their bond as he pulled her deeper in his mouth. With his free hand, he let his fingers roam her glorious body, down her shoulders, across her ribs and down to her hips. And then he began to explore her sex with his blunt fingers, never entering her, just teasing her tiny nub, back and forth, back and forth, until she was screaming with another climax.

\* \* \* \*

Weak and sated, Alyssa was pliant when he rolled her over and placed her on all fours. Slowly, he entered her, stretching her to capacity, her backside pressed tightly against his groin. He was rolling his hips, slow strokes meant to fan the flame, not send her over the edge, not yet. This would last. He'd make it last.

Her heart was hammering, her body raging at her for release,

but she didn't know if she could come again. The pleasure was almost painful now. The tension was building again and she thought, *it can't be possible to feel this much, to need his touch so much. To have to have his body in mine or die unfulfilled, incomplete. It just can't be...*

\* \* \* \*

The beast was riding him hard now, he could no longer keep it slow. It demanded he take her hard and fast to sate this terrible hunger she'd let loose. He pounded into her harder, forcing her to take all of him. In and out. In and out. Over and over, while she met his every stroke, the hunger in her as powerful as his own. He could feel a rumble in her chest as she ground herself against his cock, demanding he take her harder, deeper, faster. He felt her spasms squeeze his shaft and lost all semblance of control, jetting his semen into her in a long, endless stream.

Bent over her, breathing heavily through his mouth while he tried to catch his breath and slow his heart rate, Blake was amazed at how strong the urge had been to mount her, to claim her yet again. But instead of being afraid of his urgency, his body's demands, Alyssa seemed to relish the wildness within him. She was surely a gift from God.

He slowly withdrew, her body reluctantly releasing him. Alyssa murmured a protest, but he'd taken her roughly and she'd be too sore for more loving right now. All he wanted to do was wrap his arms around her and hold her until they had to leave for the flight to New Orleans. "Sleep, love. We need to get some rest. It's going to be a long night and an even longer day tomorrow."

He stroked her hair, her back, until she drifted into a dreamless sleep. Yet he remained awake, his mind in turmoil.

He'd have to tell her about his past tomorrow. He should have done so before, but they were so happy. What would he do if she turned away from him? He wouldn't let it happen, that's all. Alyssa would understand, he knew she would. On that thought, he let his eyes drift closed and joined her in sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Blake woke Alyssa at seven that evening. It was time for them to get going if they were going to make their eleven o'clock flight on time. At least they were flying out of Newark so they wouldn't have to battle the New York City traffic, which congested the airports.

After a leisurely shower, they dressed and quickly repacked their bags. Within an hour, they were out the door, leaving Pierre in charge as they once again headed to the airport.

They made their way through security and were sitting in first class before Alyssa noticed that Blake was acting nervous, uneasy, which was way too weird for such a confident man.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No, not really."

She frowned at his obvious lie. Something was definitely bothering him.

"Once they dim the lights after takeoff, I'll tell you what's going on inside my head, okay?"

It took twenty minutes for the flight attendants to come around with blankets and pillows and turn down the lights. Most of their fellow fliers would be asleep in moments and then he could tell Alyssa his tale.

Alyssa waited, knowing that whatever Blake had to say would be important and he was terrified to tell her. Did he think that whatever he had to say would make her turn away from him?

Nothing could do that, nothing in this life or the next. Blake was obviously fumbling with a way to start his explanation when Alyssa interrupted his thoughts, “Just spit it out, Blake. Start from the beginning. It’ll be easier that way.”

Blake closed his eyes and began, “Almost thirty four years ago my mother’s family, along with several other packs, were enjoying a week of celebration, a reunion of sorts. My mother was beautiful and full of light and laughter.

“One man seemed rather attentive toward my mother, she was quite a catch, young, unmated, infectious in her joy for life. Everything was fine until weeks after the reunion ended. He came to her one night and stole her from her bed. He kept her for three days and nights, raping her over and over. She finally caught him unawares and managed to escape. On her way home, she ran into a bunch of Humans, a hunting party. Too injured to change, she ran to them as they stepped out of the trees ringing a meadow. By this time, she was incoherent. Already drunk, the men needed no urging to take the law into their own hands.

“Recognizing the direction from where she’d run, they set to tracking her movements, leaving one man behind to see her to safety. They found the cabin and saw the man stumble out, bleeding from deep gouges in his cheeks. They had no doubt that they’d found her rapist. Not knowing exactly what manner of creature this man was, they shot him several times, until finally he fell to the ground, presumably dead.

“Quickly sobering up by now, they knew that they needed to get rid of the body, so they took it with them and buried him somewhere. At least, I assume they buried him. A couple hours later my mother’s pack showed up ready to mete out justice to dispatch him so he wouldn’t rise as Vampire, but he was already gone. They assumed he ran, and when they contacted this man’s family, they learned that he never returned home. After learning



about the rape his entire pack disowned him, vowed to hunt him down and eradicate him if they ever saw him again.

“A week later my mother realized she was pregnant with me. Having wanted children more than anything, there was no thought in her mind to get rid of me. I was her child and my father was gone. And that was that. No one ever heard from him again. Until four months ago when he calmly introduced himself to me as my father. His name is Emmanuel Winters and he's also Elizabeth's uncle. He was behind the attack at the Canadian compound and I vowed then that I'd find him and destroy him. I've put you in danger, Alyssa, and for that I am sorry.”

“Don't you dare say anything so stupid again, Blake.” She wanted to shake him for thinking she'd blame him for something that was not his fault. “How could you believe for even one minute that I would turn away from you because your father did some evil things and has become the very thing we are forced to hunt?”

\* \* \* \*

She gripped his hand so hard, he felt as though his bones were being crushed. He hadn't even realized she'd tried to comfort him while he'd told his account of what had happened over three decades earlier. He couldn't help but think of the awful ramifications that the Humans' desire to avenge a hurt young woman had caused. Had they left his body behind, he could have been destroyed in the ritual way and none of the turmoil would ever have happened. But fate could be a fickle bitch.

How many lost lives was his father responsible for, and how many of their kind were dead because of one creature's evil? How many more would die before he could take him down? Blake was still lost in his memories, still thinking about what his

father had done to his mother, when Alyssa raised her hand toward the flight attendant, a perky little blonde, with a bubbly voice.

“Can we have a glass of champagne and a ginger ale please?”

The woman smiled at her and went to get their drinks.

Blake looked over at Alyssa and smiled, “Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“No, not drunk, just a little relaxed. Here I am, the one usually terrified on a plane and it’s you who’s uptight tonight. With all the flying back and forth that we’ve been doing, I think I’ve finally got my fear of flying beat.”

“I love you, Alyssa. You know that, right?”

“Oh, Blake, of course I do. Just as I’ll love you until well after we’ve left this earth. You *are* my heart. Don’t ever doubt that.”

“I was so afraid you’d despise me and our children. Sometimes I feel like I’m tainted, coming from such a man.”

“That’s utter nonsense and you know it. Now here comes your champagne, and if you’re a good boy, I might invite you into that very small bathroom over there.”

Blake caught his breath, seriously tempted by the idea of taking her against the wall. “Oh, don’t tempt me, woman. You need your rest. Catch a few winks while there’s still time. We’ll be off and running the second our feet hit the tarmac.”

\* \* \* \*

The weather in New Orleans could only be described as a sauna. Their clothes stuck to them and it was only seven in the morning. *How can anybody live in this suffocating heat?* Blake thought.

Alasdair Connelly was not what Blake expected. With a name like Alasdair, Blake thought Connelly a bookish sort, wearing a tweed jacket who spoke in an upper crust British or Scots

accent. Instead he was a tall, thickly muscled man who looked like he'd been a football player in a former life.

"Before we go any further, don't call me Alasdair. It drives me nuts. Just call me Dare. You have everything?" he asked, looking at the two small carryons.

"We've been traveling light and often in the last week." Blake explained whilst keeping a close eye on Alyssa. He was worried about her in this heat. Her morning sickness had started right after she woke from her nap on the plane.

She'd spent the last hour of the flight tossing her cookies and was probably close to dehydration. He needed to get her out of this heat for a while and pour some liquids down her throat and maybe some crackers. Isn't that what you were supposed to give pregnant women who are vomiting up their toenails?

Blake waited until they were in Dare's heavily-tinted, air-conditioned Jeep Liberty before explaining about the crisis that threatened all shifters. He even told him about the treaty, the existence of the Were-bears and Were-cats and his mother's abduction.

By the time he'd reached the part about Beau Desjardin, Dare had no qualms about disclosing whatever information may help prevent a worldwide catastrophe.

"I can tell you right now without looking at my records, what name Beau was going by three years ago. I set up the identity myself, instead of hiring it out as I'd normally do."

Alyssa gasped. "So, what's his name?"

## Chapter Seventeen

“He wanted to be reinvented as Michael Bodine. He didn’t want to lose all connection to his family so he took a little piece of his father with him.”

Blake and Alyssa exchanged glances. He knew she was still a little queasy so he wasn’t surprised when she leaned her head forward, closed her eyes and enjoyed the air-conditioned ride while he took over the conversation. “I imagine, when leaving everything we know behind us, we want to take at least a part of the past with us, to remind us of who and what we are.”

“I wasn’t criticizing, just pointing out that the point of going into hiding is to disappear completely.” Dare countered.

“Maybe, like the message he left behind for us to find, he was giving us a fighting chance to locate him if we needed to,” Alyssa quietly suggested.

Blake looked over at her. He’d thought she’d fallen asleep, but even as sick as she was, her brain was working. God, he loved the woman. She’d said exactly what he’d been thinking.

The car was silent, each lost in their own thoughts, their own worries as Dare guided the jeep toward the bayou.

“We’re heading to the refuge?” asked Blake.

“That’s the plan. I have to go through our records there to find out where he went. And I have to pick up something I think

you'll need."

"Why didn't you look for the information already? You knew why we were coming."

"First of all, I didn't know who you were. I've never heard Alyssa's voice over the telephone before and she could have been coerced. Secondly, I needed to see you face to face to determine whether you were what you said you were. How was I to know who I was giving information to?"

"You're right. Had you had the information at your fingertips today and we weren't the good guys, you could have been tortured for it," Blake granted, although he was still aware of the time ticking, ticking, ticking away. Even if he got his mother back, would she be a Vampire and have to be destroyed or was she already dead? What were the chances of getting her back at all?

Alyssa reached over and grabbed his hand, squeezing his fingers in reassurance. *Don't borrow trouble. She may be keeping quiet to protect you, ya know.*

*I know. I just don't want to fail her again. If I'd stayed in closer contact, this wouldn't have happened.*

*Don't do this to yourself Blake. You don't know how long this has been planned or even if you could have stopped anything, even if you'd been there.*

Blake sighed. *You're right. I'm just depressing myself and that won't help.*

*No, it won't. We'll find her. One way or another, we'll find her and take care of her. Together.*

Blake nodded and closed his eyes for the rest of the trip. He was exhausted, they were almost out of time and he had no idea where to go from here.

"Hey, look out your windows," Dare advised. Giant cypress trees dripping Spanish moss lined the meandering road. Even

through closed windows they heard the wildlife in the swamp. Snakes slithered across the road in front of the slow moving car while alligators sunned themselves from their muddy nests.

Whatever they had expected the refuge to look like, they hadn't expected this antebellum paradise. Oaks at least two hundred years old lined the driveway and shaded the plantation.

The big house itself, although time-weathered, looked magnificent. Four large rounded columns surrounded the house's main body and a wide porch encircled the upper floor. Its simple elegance stunned their somewhat jaded eyes. Although not the largest plantation house, it was definitely a large home for one man and thus easily had room enough to house their people when necessary.

The magnificent entryway left them both awestruck. Two large rooms on each side flanked a wide central hall where an opulent chandelier hung at least twenty feet high. Each room had been lavishly furnished with antiques that looked as though they'd been in residence since before the Civil War. Rich linen panels covered floor to ceiling length windows.

They didn't have a chance to take it all in before Dare led to them to the rear of the house. Safely nestled in the antebellum's cradle, Dare kept his high-tech office. A masculine cherry wood desk was the only piece of history in the room. From the contemporary black leather chairs and couches, to electronics. A big flat screen plasma TV was mounted on one wall and enough office equipment to run three businesses lay scattered throughout the room. This is where Dare made his money, enough to keep the sanctuary open and to keep his plantation home in excellent repair.

"I've never asked this before, but having seen all of this I just have to know. What do you do when you're not helping our people?" Alyssa asked, looking around the room in awe one

more time.

"My family built this house and grew sugar cane. The profit was invested and has kept growing over the last two hundred years. So that's what I do, I invest."

"Perhaps you should be taking care of our portfolio," Blake said. "Especially with the babies coming." He looked over at Alyssa, amazed. "Did you see the gardens when we drove up? Absolutely beautiful. *Gone With the Wind* has nothing on this place."

Dare nodded while typing on his computer. "I've had all of my records inputted onto the computer here. The records show that I run a bed and breakfast out of the house so technically I'm not lying. I do have guests from time to time. I pay taxes on my supposed income and everything."

"The best way to hide something is often in plain sight," Blake murmured.

"Exactly," Dare quipped, his grey eyes alight.

Blake and Alyssa sank down into one of the comfortable sofas and waited for Dare to work his magic.

"Here it is. After he left here I sent him to you in New Jersey, Alyssa. From there, he was going on to London. Apparently he was planning on staying there on his own because he wasn't going to another safe house, or so he said."

"Anyway, the main reason we're here is to pick up some keys. I usually stay in the city so that this house is kept separate from my normal everyday life. That's why we're here so early in the morning. I usually don't get to my *office* until ten or so, so no one will know we've been out here."

"And what are the keys for?" Alyssa asked.

"Why, for Beau's house, of course."

"He has a house here?" Could it really be as simple as walking in and finding the book in his house? No way. It couldn't

be that simple, otherwise Beau wouldn't have left such a cryptic message in New Jersey.

"He lived in New Orleans for several years. That's how we met actually. His parents are buried in one of the cemeteries near the city."

Blake and Alyssa exchanged glances. "We're going to need to search his place," they said in unison.

"Hence, the reason we're here, to get the keys."

Blake rolled his eyes at Dare's attempt at sarcasm. Alyssa pulled herself to her feet and sighed. "Well, let's go then," she muttered.

Blake looked down at her. He could tell she was exhausted, but trying to hide it from him. "I know you're tired, Alyssa. But in a few more days, all of this running around will be over, and we can get some rest."

Alyssa smiled up at him. "I know. Well, let's do it," she said, looking over at Dare as if telling him, *Okay. I'm up. Let's go before I collapse again.* Dare nodded and led the way back through the house and down the steps.

The ride to Beau's house was uneventful and the property looked like any other found throughout New Orleans. In the shotgun style, its one story was painted white, but dulled with age. A narrow front porch with an overhang supported columns with lacy Pre-Victorian brackets. It was quite charming, despite its small size.

They were on the front porch when the trio sensed company. Evil had invaded the house. Blake shoved Alyssa toward Alasdair. "Get her out of here," he demanded. Blake watched as Dare guided her back into his car and drove away. Through their bond he listened to her conversation with Dare. If there wasn't trouble brewing he might have snorted at her wit.

"Any particular reason you're acting like a New York City taxi



driver?" she asked.

"We don't know who may have been watching the house." His voice sounded distracted.

"We can't just leave Blake there by himself!"

"There wasn't a choice. As long as you're there, you're a liability he can't afford. You know that as well as I do."

"You could have just handed me the keys and stayed behind to help him."

"And if you had been followed? If you were caught? What then?" he snarled.

"No need to be nasty. I get your point," she sighed, her mind full of worry. "Blake shouldn't be facing danger alone." Why didn't they think to have Sam send someone with them?

"As soon as I have you in a safe place, I'll go back and make sure nothing happens to your mate," he acquiesced.

"If it isn't already too late," she mumbled, fully aware that with his exceptional hearing, Dare knew perfectly well she was pissed with the situation.

Blake felt Alyssa's worry swamp his mind and there wasn't anything he could do to put her at ease. He needed all of his attention if he were to defeat whatever waited inside. Reluctant, but knowing the necessity, Blake blocked his mind from Alyssa, severing the mental connection between them. Even though it felt like he'd cut his lifeline. Shaking off the sense of loss, Blake eased the front door open, fully aware that he was walking into a trap. Whoever lurked inside gleefully anticipated the battle to come.

\* \* \* \*

Alyssa clenched her teeth in agony as Blake severed their mental connection. A gaping hole opened in her soul. Intellectually, she

knew he needed to focus all of his attention on the battle to come, that his need to protect her and himself needed to be uppermost in his mind. She knew that more than likely he was perfectly fine. But in her heart, it felt as though Blake was lost to her forever. Her urgency increased exponentially. “Hurry, Dare. I don’t know what’s going on. He’s cut himself off from me,” she cried.

Dare’s gaze met hers, then he simply stated, “It’s for the best—for now.”

Alyssa nodded, knowing no matter what her mind knew, until she could see that Blake was safe, could feel their mental bond again, she’d feel only half alive. Lost.

\* \* \* \*

Blake felt the breath on his neck before he was aware of the presence behind him. He swung around, kicking out with his right leg as he did, catching Keenan off guard. He was barely able to dodge the blow, but somehow sidestepped quickly enough. “What the hell are you doing here?” Blake demanded.

“What I was sent here to do. Roland is here and he isn’t alone.”

Blake nodded, pissed that he’d been caught off guard, but thankful for Keenan’s backup. “We go in together then,” Blake acknowledged. “You take your brother and I’ll go after the other one.”

\* \* \* \*

Downtown New Orleans felt like another world compared to the rest of the city and the parishes surrounding it. All concrete and steel, it was typical of any major city in the US. Dare pulled into

the parking garage adjacent to his office building and led Alyssa into the high-rise where he kept his investment corporation.

This was no small time operation. There were rows of cubicles, manned with men and woman working over computer terminals, telephones glued to their ears. Dare introduced Alyssa to Cerridwen, his personal assistant and showed her into the conference room. "Cerridwen, I need you to keep Alyssa occupied for a while. It may take a couple of hours."

"Yes, sir. Anything you need me to do before you go?"

"Cancel today's meetings. Reschedule them for early next week. Cite a personal emergency if anyone asks. Now," he said, turning to Alyssa "if I leave you here, are you going to stay put?"

Alyssa just looked at him, chagrined. How'd he know that for just a moment she'd considered following? "Yes. I'll be here. Now, go do what you have to do."

Dare left, making eye contact with his assistant. Telling her in no uncertain terms that she was to make sure Alyssa didn't get herself into trouble and that she was to stay put.

Alyssa rolled her eyes, knowing exactly what he was doing.

Cerridwen was a beautiful woman. Her skin shone like warm gold, her gray eyes had an exotic look. She couldn't have stood more than five feet tall in her bare feet. But it was her hair that was her crowning glory. Pure black with blue highlights cut in a pixie-style shag. Alyssa figured her age to be in her mid to late twenties, but she had the confidence and serenity of one much older.

Alyssa smiled at Dare's assistant, thankful that the conference room door was firmly closed. "So how long has Dare had a bear working for him, Cerridwen?"

She laughed. "Call me Cerri. Only Dare uses my first name and that's because I insist on calling him sir while in the office."

\* \* \* \*

Blake entered the house first, his every sense open, trying to discern exactly where the enemy waited for them. Keenan stood behind him. The narrow room's windows let in enough light that there were no shadows in which to hide. Well, so far, so good. That meant Roland and his partner lurked in one of the side bedrooms, waiting for them to pass by before attacking them.

The living room's disarray told Blake they had interrupted Roland tossing the place. Did he really think Beau would have left the Book shoved underneath the couch cushions or sitting on one of the bookcases?

Back to back now, Blake and Keenan crept down the hall, ready for battle. They were near the end when a big blue-black panther launched itself at Blake. Keenan was busy fighting off his brother who appeared behind the panther but hadn't bothered changing into his bear form for the attack. They were matched in height, but Keenan was the bigger physically of the two.

Blake was having a hard time of it. The cat was attacking viciously, lunging for his neck and constantly, trying to rake him with its claws. It was all he could do to evade the ferocious beast. There was no time to change into his wolf form, all he could do was try to catch the panther in his hands and wrench its neck.

Roland was going for the kill. Each strike of fist to flesh was meant to cause major internal injuries.

Using his magic, Keenan shoved Roland away while simultaneously changing into his bear form. His clothes just seemed to dissolve from his body as he pulsed with a white light. One second he appeared Human, the next he was an enraged bear intent on destroying his enemy, brother or not.

If Blake weren't so damned busy trying to defend himself, he would have felt jealous that the transformation seemed so

effortless and a whole lot less painful for the Were-bear than what the wolves went through. Perhaps it was the druid blood that ran through his line that made the process different for Keenan.

Using Blake's slight distraction against him, the panther lunged with its outstretched claws, gouging his side. Blake hissed in pain. He knew the wounds were deep and would take some time to heal. He couldn't afford the blood loss, not against such a powerful opponent.

Roland lay sprawled on his back where Keenan had knocked him. Desperately, he rolled out of the way just as the bear swiped at him with his massive paws. But he wasn't fast enough. Keenan had struck first blood, raking Roland's leg. Knowing he was at a disadvantage, Roland backed away and changed.

Keenan shook his head and lumbered toward his brother, attacking with teeth and claws, backing the smaller bear into a corner. Roland was losing blood fast now, his brother was relentless in his attack.

Blake also grew weaker from blood loss, his chance of getting close enough to do some serious damage to the panther was almost non-existent. Something had to change in his favor fast or all was lost.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

“Could you use some help there, Blake?” asked Dare, who’d managed to come in the kitchen door from the rear of the house without being detected.

Blake grunted, just missing another swipe of the panther’s claw as it sprang away. “You could say that,” he said as he wobbled on his feet, turning in the direction the panther had leaped.

Roland and the panther were now outnumbered three to two. Knowing he faced a losing battle, Roland charged past Keenan and lumbered down the hall, transforming back into his Human form as he escaped, using magick to clothe himself. Now cornered, the panther trembled, his desire to flee warring with his desire to shed blood.

“I wouldn’t advise it,” Dare said, his voice deadly despite the quite tone or perhaps because of it.

Blake winced, holding his injured side while he stared at the panther. “You might as well change into your Human form. You’re not getting out of here. There are three of us and I doubt you can take down two wolves and a bear all at once.”

The panther snarled, preparing to pounce. Fed up by the panther’s lack of common sense, the trio stepped forward, backing the panther completely into a corner of the living room.

It had nowhere to run.

Instead of ceding to the greater power, it lunged forward, swiped at Dare, knocked over Blake and leaped over Keenan as it flew out the back door and into the alley behind the house.

Even with their preternatural speed, the panther had disappeared by the time they reached the kitchen door. Blake stood there stunned. Keenan was pissed if his expression was anything to go by and Dare cursed a blue streak as he searched the alley.

Dare came back a few minutes later, shaking his head, speaking to the men in general. "I followed the cat's trail down the alley and to the corner, then it just disappeared. Someone must have been waiting in a car for it."

Dare then turned to Keenan, "I'm assuming you're Keenan?"

Keenan nodded, looking angry with himself for allowing his brother to escape and wary of this stranger who already knew who he was.

Dare looked back at Blake. "Damn, you've taken quite a hit. Alyssa is going to be pissed."

"You have no idea," he replied. Despite the pain, Blake reached out for Alyssa, seeking, no needing, their mental bond now, more than ever.

There was no way they'd be able to search this place now. He and Keenan both needed medical attention before the search resumed.

\* \* \* \*

Cerri did her best to distract Alyssa, but she knew the woman suffered without Blake. They'd been talking for some time about how Cerri had come to work for Dare, but Alyssa clearly wasn't hearing a word. That was all right so long as she didn't try to run

off. Cerri didn't want to chase the woman down, her feet would never be the same if she had to run in four-inch heels.

Just when Alyssa seemed to reach her limit, she smiled. Cerri sighed. *Thank God*, she thought. *Blake must have made contact. What else could make a frantic woman who'd been biting her nails and tapping her foot constantly cease all movement and grin?*

\* \* \* \*

*Where have you been*, Alyssa yelled. It didn't matter if she only thought it. *I've been worried about you, dammit*. Now she was crying. Tears silently leaked from her eyes, but when she glanced up, she realized Cerri had left the room. She must have come to the conclusion that everything was all right now and that she could trust Alyssa to stay put. She had to get control of herself. It wouldn't do for Blake to see her crying or to hear it in her voice. *What happened?* Blake really didn't want to answer, she could feel his hesitancy through the bond.

*You won't believe it. We ran into Roland and a Were-cat. It managed to gouge my side pretty good.*

*You're hurt?* It was a stupid question, he wasn't hiding his pain from her anymore. She could feel exactly how much he was hurting. *Dammit. What was Dare thinking leaving you all alone?*

*He did the right thing.*

*I knew you shouldn't have gone in by yourself.*

*I wasn't alone. Keenan showed up just as I was about to go in. We both got our asses kicked. We're on our way back now.*

\* \* \* \*

After examining Keenan's and Blake's injuries, Dare made an



executive decision. "We're heading back to the refuge," he told them.

"Alyssa isn't going to like..."

Dare interrupted Blake impatiently. Like he would really keep him from Alyssa now. Was he crazy? Alyssa *would* kill him. Besides Blake may very well need Alyssa's blood if a transfusion was necessary. "I'll have Cerri, my assistant, meet us there. She'll bring Alyssa with her." Blake and Keenan were about to protest bringing in another outsider, but Dare had expected their argument. "She knows about our people and I trust her, besides she's doctored me up enough times to know what she's doing.

"I don't know..." Keenan started.

"Trust me. She can help both of you."

Keenan shrugged, apparently leaving the decision up to Blake.

"Sure why not," Blake said with a sigh and settled into Dare's SUV.

The ride seemed to take forever. Dare sensed Keenan had some serious internal injuries. He'd taken a severe beating, but at least he wasn't bleeding as much as Blake. Other than a gash above his eyebrow that would leave a pretty good scar and some impressive bruises, from all outward appearances, he'd fared much better than Roland had. Even with the pain, he looked smug about that.

\* \* \* \*

Alyssa wasn't alone more than ten minutes when Cerri walked back into the room. "Dare just called and it seems we're to meet them out at the refuge so I can doctor up your mate's injuries. And they're bringing someone named Keenan with them."

Alyssa nodded in understanding, following Cerri out of the

building. "I'm just glad Keenan was there when Blake needed him. Did Dare say exactly what happened to them?" she asked, worried for Blake all over again.

"No, just that they would both need my care."

"I thought you were Dare's assistant?" she asked confused, obviously she had not been paying close enough attention earlier. But who could blame her?

"I am. I assist whenever he needs it. I'm also a vet. Which was how I met Dare, remember?"

"Um, honestly, no I don't. My mind was on other things."

"That's okay. I don't blame you. If I had a mate and he was in danger I'd probably be frantic myself. Why don't you get some rest during the drive, it'll take at least an hour in this traffic to get there."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Alyssa laid her head back and closed her eyes, needing the solace of the quiet car to calm her nerves. How badly was Blake hurt? She had to know. Reaching out, it took only a thought to connect with her mate. *Are you sure you're okay?*

*I'm fine, Alyssa. Definitely going to need to take it easy for the rest of the day though before we can go hunting again.*

*For the book or Roland?* she asked him.

*Honey, I'm pissed. We're going baited for bear and book.*

Cerri and Alyssa were waiting in the plantation house when the men pulled up. Alyssa was out of the house and down the steps before Blake even had his door open. She stared in horror at the bright red blood soaking through his white cotton t-shirt. "Are you still bleeding?" she asked as she wrapped her arm around his waist to help him into the house. "Lean on me."

"I think it has pretty much stopped bleeding now, but it's gonna hurt like hell when I remove my shirt.

"It'll probably reopen the wounds, too," she muttered. She

had no idea he'd been injured this bad.

Cerri was rooted to the spot. She'd stopped dead in her tracks at the first sight of Keenan. Alyssa smiled, sensing that Cerri had just met her match. At least something good had come out of this horrible day.

Keenan looked just as blindsided as Cerri. He stood straight and tall, even though Alyssa could tell he was in a lot of pain. Even in her high heels she looked like she'd probably only reach his chin.

\* \* \* \*

After a minute, Cerri realized she still stood there like a statue while Blake and Keenan limped toward the house. She shook her head as if to clear it, then rushed into action. "Dare, help Keenan into the house. I need to set up a sick room," she said and turned around and swiftly headed back into the house. She needed a few minutes to collect herself before she faced him again. This, she wasn't expecting.

A mate! Who the hell would have thought she'd find a mate while so many others in her clan went unmated? She was already a social pariah, the other she-bears were going to be pissed that this hunky thing would be out of circulation once they met him.

Unlike their animal brethren who were solitary creatures, the Were-bear lived in clans, groups consisting of extended family. In her case, Cerri's mother had been the clan's healer. They'd been accepted into the group after her mother's second marriage. A hunter accidentally killed Cerri's father when she was a teenager and, after her mother passed away, the clan allowed her to stay associated with them only because of her veterinary skills.

Unlike wolves, bears didn't generally believe in happily ever after, and living with only one mate their entire lives. Cerri was

different, she'd always known there would be only one man for her. And he was just outside in the hall, heading her way. But first, she needed to clear her mind, she was a healer first and her patients needed her.

Dare helped the men into a guestroom where two queen-sized beds awaited. Cerri had already set up a tray with antiseptic, sutures, antibiotics and bandages. She also had a medical bag filled with sedatives—if needed.

She only fell back on traditional veterinary medicine when necessary, choosing to use her metaphysical ability to heal the injured whenever possible. In her clan, only those in near critical condition were brought to her for healing for fear of being tainted by the *witch*. It was just one of the many ways she was different than the rest of her people.

“Get them onto the beds,” she ordered. Although she wanted to rush to Keenan’s side, Blake was still losing too much blood so she would have to treat him first. Cerri glanced over at her mate as Blake eased onto the bed. “Is that gash the only place you’re bleeding from?” she asked, pointing toward his forehead.

“Aye. I’m sure I’m pretty banged up inside and a few cracked ribs, but Blake needs you more than I do at the moment.” There was an underlying meaning to Keenan’s words that she hadn’t missed, but she didn’t have time to dwell on it. Her patient was bleeding all over the bed.

Cerri could see the tears in the t-shirt where the cat had caught Blake with its claws. The fabric was glued to his side with dried blood and trying to pull the shirt off over his head would cause him unnecessary pain. “It would probably be easier if we just cut that off,” she said when she saw Blake start struggling to remove it himself.

While Alyssa stood on the other side of the bed holding his hand, Cerri began to cut Blake’s shirt away from his body,

carefully peeling the stiff cotton from the wounds. “You have two choices,” she said to Blake, “I can either sew you up or I can use magick to heal you. I’ll leave the choice up to you.” While Blake made his decision, she prayed that he would not be like the others, shunning her magick as evil. All she could do was wait. She couldn’t help but listen in on their conversation—one of her other gifts that she couldn’t always control.

\* \* \* \*

Blake stared up at the small woman bending over him, thinking about her offer. *What do you think Alyssa? Do you trust her?*

*I trust Dare and he vouches for her. And we know Keenan’s magick is not evil. I say go for it.*

Blake pondered the obvious decision. They had a mission to accomplish. He didn’t have time to wait for his wounds to heal even if he would be healed within a few hours. “I’ll let you heal me.”

Cerri smiled, then closed her eyes and placed her hands over Blake’s open wounds. Her hands grew warm, then hot, against his skin. Blake felt the wounds close, felt the pain slowly disappear, until all he was aware of was the warmth of her hands and the dried blood on his skin.

\* \* \* \*

After healing Blake, Cerri stepped back, shoulders slumped. Turning toward Keenan, she straightened, then gasped, surprised to see him sitting up.

“You should be lying down,” she told him, exasperated. “You could barely stand up straight when you walked in here.”

Keenan just smiled. “I just needed to lay down for a bit. I,

too, have the ability to heal injuries.”

“You can?”

“Aye.” No elaboration, just a one-word response. His eyes said he’d have plenty to say to her after this crisis was over though.

“I’ve never met anyone else besides my mother who could do what I do.”

Keenan’s eye’s twinkled. “Well, now you have.”

“I hate to break up this love fest,” said Dare, “but we have a Were-cat and a rogue Were-bear to track as well as the Druid’s Book to find. We need to come up with some sort of plan or we’ll never make the deadline. We have little time left until the exchange is to be made.”

“I imagine you’ll need some help to track them,” said Cerri. Although she hated to ask her clan for anything, they were heading into danger. She’d put aside her pride...for now. “I can call our warrior council together and see if they’re willing to send a few Were-bear to help you hunt.”

Keenan looked to Blake and then nodded. “I have a few men waiting at a motel near the airport. I’ll send for them as well.”

“In the meantime,” Blake said, “Dare, I want you to stay with Alyssa and make sure she’s kept safe. Perhaps you two can put your heads together and figure out where else, besides Beau’s house, we can look for the book.”

Alyssa looked at the three men in turn before asking, “Did you get the chance to search the house at all while you were there?”

“No,” Blake answered, “but they were interrupted as well. They’ll have gone back to finish as soon as we left the area this morning.”

“How do you know they won’t already have what you’re looking for when you go back to look then?” Cerri asked,

curious as to why they'd waste their time searching someplace that had already been tossed before.

"A pair o' reasons," Keenan said. "Neither of them were professionals, they were looking in the obvious locations, and two, I doubt Beau actually left the book there. At most, he probably left another clue. But we need to check, just the same."

"I agree," Blake said. "You're a miracle worker, Cerri. The main reason to return though is to pick up their scent trail. I'm sure they left one for us to follow this time."

"You mean, they think they'll be leading you into a trap." Alyssa sighed, not needing an answer from Blake.

Cerri knew she hated not being able to join Blake when he might need her, but it was better for them all if she stayed behind. She needed to think about her cubs and the fact that she'd be a distraction during a battle.

"Of course, but we won't be going alone. We'll have Keenan's men and possibly some of Cerri's clan. Hopefully, we'll have an edge that they won't be expecting."

\* \* \* \*

After a quick shower and change of clothes, Cerri, Keenan and Blake left to request a meeting with the warrior council. As leader of his clan, Keenan should be granted an audience rather quickly, but with politics involved, it could take hours to establish a raiding party. Precious hours that could be spent looking for the answers they needed.

The warrior's council was comprised of five men and five women, all of them in peak physical condition. They weren't just the governing body, they were the best warriors the clan could offer. Within an hour of entering the clan's land, six warriors volunteered to help Keenan track down Roland and the Were-cat,

fully aware that they were likely going to be led straight into a trap. After his raiding party had been assembled, Keenan asked to have a word with the clan leader.

One of the volunteers stepped forward. No more than thirty-five and heavily muscled, the black haired man and cleared his throat. "I'm Nick Dagon, the leader of this clan."

"I'd like a private word with you."

Nick nodded. Following Keenan as he made his way past Blake and the waiting warriors. Cerri was nowhere in sight.

"I'll be taking Cerri with me when I head back home. I hope that won't be a problem for you."

Nick sighed, seemingly in relief. "It will actually be a blessing. Some of my people have labeled her a witch, and since her mother passed away, she has been treated like an outsider. Cerridwen has lived separate from our people for the last six years because of the superstitious fears of my people. You are in need of a doctor?"

"No. Although we haven't discussed it, she knows as well as I do that we are mates. I'm going to take her back to Alaska with me and court her properly instead of trying to force a bond with her now. My line has druid blood running through it, and from what I can tell, so does Cerri. She'll fit in with my people where she didn't fit in here."

"It's for the best then. If you're asking my permission, you have it. But you'll need hers. I won't force her to go with you. We're the only people she has besides Dare."

"She has me now. I'll give her the choice. If she wants to stay here, then I'll have to fly back as often as I can and get to know her here on her turf." Keenan looked around and still didn't see Cerri. "Where is she anyway?"

Nick smiled. "Packing up the rest of her belongings she keeps here when she has a patient. She said that she was moving



on.” Nick laughed at Keenan’s disgusted look.

“You mean, I went through this whole conversation and you already knew she was leaving.”

Nick was still laughing. “Yeah, but she didn’t tell me why. Now I know.” He was still chuckling as he walked away to join his team.

Keenan spotted Cerri immediately as she left a small log cabin on the very outskirts of the compound. Rage pulsed through his body. How could they treat her that way? Didn’t they know what she sacrificed every time she used magick to heal one of them? Didn’t they notice how tired she became, how slowly she moved? She took on their pain as she healed them and still they scorned her. He would make her happy. His people would welcome her, and never again would she feel the hatred of another being because of who and what she was.

## *Chapter Nineteen*

An empty house greeted Blake and Keenan when they returned to the scene of the earlier attack. By the time everyone was in position, it was late afternoon, giving the Were-cat time to come back and finish what he'd started. The rooms were in worse condition now than they'd been that morning. In fact, whoever had ransacked this place left empty handed because they'd been in a blind rage.

The invader had shredded every book, curtain and piece of clothing in the small house. Shards of broken china littered the kitchen floor and not a piece of furniture in the house had survived unscathed. The couch had been sawed in half, the hacksaw still laying amongst the ruins. The kitchen chairs were missing their legs and the table had claw marks scored into the top of it. All in all, they'd thoroughly trashed the place.

"I doubt the book's still here, if it ever was, but we better take a quick look through," suggested Blake. The pair split up. Beau, or his parents, would have designed an escape hatch to get out of this place in a hurry if both doors were blocked so Blake went in search of it. He found it behind a panel in the smaller of the two bedrooms. It led to a crawl space under the house, but there was no evidence of the book anywhere in the room or below the house.

Keenan wasn't having any better luck apparently. There wasn't even a shred of anything personal left in the larger bedroom. There were no photos, no personal papers, nothing to suggest who owned the house. Whatever personal touches the house had contained had been removed long ago. No wonder the Were-cat left so enraged.

The only thing they found in the house was what they expected. A small pool of dried blood lay on the floor where someone smashed a rear window—from the inside—and a blood trail that led out the kitchen door and into the alley behind the house. The Were-cat and his partners should have saved themselves the trouble and painted a sign that said, "This way to the ambush." Blake and Keenan shook their heads at the obvious ploy. No subtlety at all.

\* \* \* \*

Cerri and the raiding party parked their cars a half mile from the house, waiting for word from Blake and Keenan when her cell phone rang.

"It's exactly what we thought. Even with the windows closed, we should be able to follow the trail the panther left behind. His scent is everywhere. He must have marked the territory from here to the ambush location to make sure we followed," Keenan told her. "You can pick Blake and I up at the house now."

"We'll be right there," she said. After checking for traffic, Cerri gunned the engine and headed to the house.

In the other car, Nick talked on the phone with Blake. "So we'll follow the original plan. We'll keep our distance and come in about ten minutes after you. You're going to be cutting it close, aren't you? You sure we shouldn't be right behind you?"

"If you come charging in right behind us, then we won't have

you in reserve to come to our rescue if it all goes to shit. We don't know how many they have waiting for us. We'll go in with just Keenan's men first. They'll expect that. You guys, they probably don't know about."

"All right, we'll be in position ten minutes after you go in," he agreed and hung up the phone.

Cerri drove the lead vehicle, a Lincoln Navigator, which contained Blake, Keenan and three of Keenan's men. The trail led them out of the city and onto the highway, exiting at Marrero. They drove south for another ten minutes. Just past the Barataria Preserve, the scent trail suddenly veered west, through a fresh water marsh.

Keenan motioned for Cerri to pull over and everyone exited the vehicle.

Blake dialed Nick's cell phone to fill him in. "Nick, head toward the Barataria Preserve. We're parked about a mile past the main entrance to the park, next to a service road. We're heading in now." Blake looked at each of the men and then Cerri. "We don't know what's waiting for us out there," he said. "If anyone wants to back out, now would be a good time to do it," he offered. As he expected, no one volunteered to stay behind. They were all anxious to kick some panther ass and hopefully have a hand in saving Humanity in the process.

Dusk fell and the area was teeming with wildlife. The group heard waterfowl, shorebirds, muskrats and frogs. Whatever they were looking for must be further inland, none of the animal life showed signs of distress. Nothing evil lay nearby or the animals would have fled to higher ground.

"We should change forms before we go after them. We might not have time to change before we come to their campsite or until they come to us," suggested Keenan.

Blake nodded. It made sense. All six of them headed into the

marsh, Keenan walking next to Cerri, his hand resting on her lower back, a purely possessive reaction when so many unmated males were nearby.

Blake decided to take these last few minutes before they headed into danger to reach out to Alyssa.

\* \* \* \*

“Dare, if the book isn’t in Beau’s house, where else could it be? Where else did he frequent here in the city? Where’d he stay when he left his house? Did he come here right away?” Alyssa asked, thinking out loud, hoping it would trigger her subconscious thoughts to come up with a new place to look.

They’d spent the afternoon searching all of the guest cabins looking for the book, and after they finished their dinner, they were going to begin searching the main house for it from the attic to the cellars, every nook and cranny. It would probably take the rest of the night to accomplish, and if it wasn’t here, she didn’t know where else to look.

“I don’t really know. He left here a few times, to run errands. He *had things to do before he left town* was all that he ever said about his middle of the night wanderings.”

“Well, we know it’s in New Orleans somewhere. We’ll figure it out. Let’s just hope we do it in time.”

“Maybe Blake and Keenan will find out something to help.”

Alyssa stared at him as if he’d lost his mind. “What are the chances that whoever the guys do leave alive will tell them anything useful about the book? If they knew where it was they wouldn’t have been searching for it this morning,” she told him.

“You’ve got a point. But who’s to say they won’t know more about what the plan is exactly. Maybe even learn how they found out about the book to begin with. And let’s not forget that we still

don't know who the leader of this conspiracy is, or what species." Dare gave her a sharp look. "Have they learned something new already?"

Alyssa didn't answer, she was already preoccupied with contacting Blake. *Blake, what's going on? You've been gone hours already.*

*I know, Alyssa. We probably won't be back until morning. It looks like we're heading into a nature preserve and I hear this one covers twenty miles of waterways and twenty thousand acres of land. It may take us some time to get where we're headed.*

*Take care of yourself out there. We'll be searching the main house soon. I'll let you know if we find anything when you get back.* She knew that he was in the middle of his transformation to wolf. She felt his pain and disorientation as if it were her own. *Good hunting,* she whispered to him, then broke their mental connection.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan led Cerri away from the rest of the men. Until he and Cerridwen were mated, he didn't trust them to keep their hands, let alone their eyes, to themselves while she stripped and went through the transformation from woman to bear. Perhaps one day he'd be comfortable with her being nude in front of others, but he seriously doubted it would ever come to pass. She was his and he didn't think he'd ever be able to stand sharing that part of her.

They'd change when they were far enough away, where they could still be heard by the others and yet still remain unseen. After a few more yards, they stopped and Keenan turned his back to Cerri. "You go ahead. I'll keep watch while you do...um, what you have to," he said through clenched teeth. A moment passed

and Keenan swallowed past the lump in his throat lest he begin drooling. He was only too aware that she was removing her clothes less than two feet behind him.

His imagination ran amok. He pictured her breasts, pert and bountiful, her nipples hard and waiting for his tongue, the black thatch of hair at the notch between her legs hiding a treasure waiting to be plundered. He wanted to turn around so badly, he had to keep his hands fisted down at his sides to keep himself from reaching for her.

\* \* \* \*

Apparently sensing his reaction to her, Cerri chuckled, then began the change. For the first time, Cerri reached for the mental bond that existed between herself and Keenan. *You can turn around now*, she told him.

\* \* \* \*

Cerri knew Keenan could sense her curiosity, her intention to watch him strip. He didn't seem to mind her unabashed interest in the least. If they'd had more time, she was sure he would have made a production of removing his clothing, but they didn't. *A pity really*, she heard him think.

Connected through their link, she knew he felt her every emotion, heard her every thought. Knew that listening to her made his bear wild with need and had his cock thickening, ready to claim his mate.

The she-bear swallowed back the saliva pooling in her mouth. Keenan was one exceptionally built male. His shoulders were wide, his stomach flat and taut and the muscles in his arms and legs, though not bulging, were definitely well defined. He was

a big man in every way and she couldn't wait to get a taste of him.

Before her eyes, Keenan began to glow, his whole body pulsing with light as he chanted in a language she'd never heard before. Where one minute a gorgeous lumberjack once stood, now a brown bear twice the size of any she'd ever seen, be it a zoo bear, wild bear or Were-bear, waited for her.

Before she had time to think about what she witnessed, Keenan herded her toward the rest of his warriors and a lone wolf. They still had a job to do. He just had to keep telling himself that he couldn't take her yet, there would be time for that later. After the battle to come, when she settled with him in Alaska.

The group spread out, moving west as they followed the scent trail left for them. The deeper into the preserve they went, the fewer animals they seemed to notice. Something had driven the animals away. It had been more than ten minutes since he'd last spotted one nearby and that had been a white-tailed deer heading in the opposite direction. Where were the wildcats, the bears, the gray fox and even the gray squirrels? Evil had driven everything away.

Keenan grunted, signaling a trap nearby. Everyone was on the lookout, waiting for the attack. Cerri's men, their ace in the hole, couldn't be far behind. Even Keenan's men were unaware a second backup team had slid into position. Besides Cerri, only Blake, Dare and Alyssa were aware of them.

Without a whisper, two panthers jumped down from the branches above, both striking out at the wolf first. It was poor strategy, for the bears were much stronger than their wolf brethren. It took no time at all for Keenan and Cerri to toss the panthers aside with one strike of their heavy paws.

The panthers shook their heads and regained their feet, slowly stalking the two bears, determined to retaliate.



\* \* \* \*

Blake was a little dazed, but unharmed. Perhaps the panthers meant only to subdue him, to capture him alive. But they were pissed now and were stalking Keenan and Cerri. Where were Keenan's men?

Blake looked around. One bear was down, a vicious claw mark across his throat, he'd been executed. The other two bears were battling each other. What in the hell was that all about?

The wolf ran to his friends, growling low in his throat, prepared to backup the pair. Without any planning, the three worked as a team, herding the panthers into a tight circle, one they couldn't easily escape.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan was enraged. He felt the instant his clansman had died, felt his life force fail, his soul take flight, could feel the battle going on between the other two. Darrell, his pilot, had a lot to answer for if Jake bothered to leave him alive. Darrell was no warrior, and Jake was one of his most loyal. It really wasn't a fair fight. As a traitor there was only one possible punishment for Darrell, death. Whether the fight was fair or not, his pilot would die today.

\* \* \* \*

Cerri was furious on Keenan's behalf. Connected as they were, their minds were one, even without a full mating, their druid blood binding them as soul mates since before they were born. They'd just had to meet for the bond to solidify.

To have been harboring a traitor all this time. No wonder Roland was always one step ahead of him, with Keenan's own pilot feeding him information.

But they had no time to dwell on it, there were two panthers that were in need of Cerri's attention at the moment. *I'll take the female, you and Blake take the male. I'm just pissed enough to take her on my own even if I were in Human form.*

Keenan started to protest her need to go one on one with the panther, but he also understood.

*Believe me, big boy, I can take care of myself. This pussy-cat doesn't stand a chance in hell.*

*All right, honey. Just be careful.*

She had to admit, Keenan did know how and when to give in graciously.

As the female panther leaped for the wolf, Cerri charged, and at the last possible moment, shoved her massive body forward to block the panther from striking Blake.

The panther hissed and growled at Cerri, showing her anger, her determination to go through the bear to get to the wolf. That was all she cared about, subduing the wolf—at all costs. An attitude that would cost the panther dearly. Cerri roared as she swatted the panther again.

Blake and Keenan circled the male panther, waiting for the moment they could go in for the kill. They knew those who waited for them at the camp were using these panthers as cannon fodder. Disposable. Perhaps as an early warning system that Blake and Keenan were approaching.

\* \* \* \*

Jake was pissed. How could he have been so blind? How could he not know one of his closest friends was a traitor? Keenan had

warned him that there might still be traitors amongst them, but never once had he expected Darrell to be one of them. They'd grown up together, brothers in all but blood.

The attack on Brennan was so quick, so ruthless, Jake didn't have a chance to react until it was too late. Brennan now lay dead at his feet and he felt Darrell gloating about the kill, about his deception. How was he able to hide such evil from so many, even those closest to him, for so long?

In an instant, Jake charged him. The traitor barely managed to evade his outstretched claws, and although Jake was intent on going for his throat, Darrell didn't seem-worried. It was as if he was only stalling, looking for a few more moments before reinforcements arrived, which concerned Jake.

Jake circled Darrell. He didn't want to kill him outright, they needed answers. How many were waiting for them? What was the layout of the camp? Where was Jeanne being held and by whom? Who was leading the conspiracy against the shape shifters?

Rather than acting nervous or terrified that he was being hunted though, Darrell continued to act cocky, like he knew something no one else did.

Was Jake's initial concern that reinforcements were on their way correct? Could Darrell be under the delusion that someone was coming to rescue him? He couldn't be that stupid, could he? Now that they had Keenan right where they wanted him, there was no reason to keep Darrell alive. His usefulness was at an end, and he was apparently too dim-witted to realize it.

\* \* \* \*

Fed up with the panther's obnoxious attitude, Cerri went on the offensive, charging toward the cat, teeth bared and claws extended. Cerri raked the panther's side, digging deep gouges

into the cat's fur and flesh, spilling first blood.

The panther reared back, hissing in pain, furious that the bear had scored a hit. She wasn't about to back down. Ignoring the pain, the cat sprang forward, striking out with her claws, but the bear evaded, moving faster than any creature she'd ever seen. She landed where the bear had been standing, leaving her back exposed.

Cerri took full advantage of the cat's impetuosity, dropping her front paws as well as most of her weight on the panther's back, crushing her spine and paralyzing her from the neck down. Her death was imminent. Cerri could hear her every thought and ruthlessly listened, needing to know everything about what lay ahead of them.

Unable to change into her Human form with her injuries and unable to survive as a panther, the cat realized that she was about to die. Would her brother fare better? Would he survive his confrontation with Roland's brother and the wolf? Would he avenge her? Somehow she doubted he'd survive the encounter. Then she thought no more as her heart stuttered, then stopped all together as she ceased to exist.

\* \* \* \*

Blake and Keenan weren't faring as well. The male panther had landed several hits against them. Their injuries, though minor, were an annoyance they could have done without. The panther was fast, moving in for each strike and then darting back out of reach. Over and over the cat jumped into the fray, attacked and leaped away.

Blake and Keenan knew they would have to change their strategy in order to defeat the big cat. Rather than be on the defensive, they were going to have to get the panther to focus on

just one of them so that the other could take him out. As Blake's injuries from that morning were still tender, Keenan decided he'd take the fall so that when he went down and the cat moved in for the kill, Blake could attack from behind, going for the panther's jugular.

Keenan had no way to communicate his plan to Blake, he would just have to trust that Blake would take advantage of the opportunity given him.

As expected, the panther darted in for another attack, Blake bounded away, but Keenan moved just a little slower than he had during the last attack, and stumbled to his knees. Let the cat think that the bear was suffering from his wounds, it would be his downfall. As the cat came in from behind, claws extended, Blake rushed him from behind, grabbed the panther by the scruff of his neck and shook, breaking the big cat's neck with the violent movements. Blake tossed the cat aside and went to Keenan's side, ensuring himself that Keenan's stumble had indeed been a ruse.

\* \* \* \*

As a group, Keenan, Cerri and Blake went to join Jake. The trio stood back and watched as Jake viciously ripped at Darrell, sending fur and flesh flying. When Darrell was too weak to fight any longer and finally had lost all hope that help would arrive in time, the four of them surrounded the traitor. It was time to get some answers.

## Chapter Twenty

Keenan took Human form using magick to clothe himself, then stepped closer to the cowering bear. “Turn Human—*Now*, traitor,” he demanded. He’d be damned before he used the man’s name again.

Darrell complied. Seemingly resigned to his fate, he spoke to the Were-beings circled around him. “I’ll tell you what I know, but it isn’t much.”

Keenan’s calm, soft-spoken tones indicated just how enraged he was when he indifferently said, “Tell us anyway.”

“I only kn... know two things,” he stammered. “How I got involved and who Roland has been reporting to.”

“Go on.”

Darrell sighed, but continued speaking after a brief pause. “A few months before Vampires attacked our compound, I was out hunting and ran into a Were-cat. I’d never seen one.”

When he paused again, Keenan growled. The others had returned to their Human forms and were just waiting for a signal from his as to what to do.

The quivering man began speaking again. “He told me the wolves were going to take over the world, using a book of magick and casting a spell, paralyzing every shape shifter in the world standing outside of a protective barrier the Druid would

construct. I only know two people with Druid blood. You and Roland.”

Darrell sighed before going on, “I knew you’d never betray your people. But Roland has always coveted power, control. He was the perfect choice. I didn’t know Vampires were involved until they attacked our people and by then I was in too deep.”

“That’s no excuse. You should have come to me if you thought the wolves were going to take control over all of us. As it is, many innocents have died because of you. Their deaths are on your head for bringing this evil to us.”

Darrell nodded, eyes downcast. “I guess I was susceptible to the thought of all that power too, it could have been right at my fingertips. I wasn’t a warrior, just a chauffeur. I guess the dream of having all that influence and control was too much for me to resist. Anyway,” he paused, took a deep breath and continued, “I knew you’d have Roland interrogate any prisoners left alive since he was in charge of compound security. All the Vampires that attacked our compound were told the same story. They supposedly wanted to capture a Druid who’d be able to cast a spell that would control all shape shifters.”

“He still believes he’ll be given control over our people and that the Vampires were to control the *Loup-garou*. They really have a hard on for you wolves,” he said, looking at Blake.

“The Were-cats I’ve seen are helping Roland and the Vampires because they think they’ll be left alone, free from being subjugated by either species.”

“Who does Roland report to?” Keenan asked calmly. Despite his cool exterior, he was battling to control the beast within that wanted to shred the sniveling traitor into tiny pieces, to give him a slow and agonizing death like that of the child found on Blake’s porch. A merciful death was far too good for him.

“Some Vampire named Emmanuel. I don’t know who he is to

Blake. But he's determined that you will suffer before you two meet again. I haven't seen him in months so I don't know what he's planned or where he is." Darrell looked back at Keenan. "That's all I know," he admitted.

"Only my mate's compassion will let you have an easy death, otherwise you would die slowly and horrible, your limbs removed while fire consumed you, hopefully while still alive, even that is too good for the likes of you." Keenan yanked the quivering man to his feet while Jake stepped behind him and snapped Darrell's neck with his powerful arms. Killing him instantly. The foursome gathered the bodies in silence and prepared to cremate them, even though they knew the smoke would betray their location.

Nick and his team arrived just as they were about to light the fire. "We'll take care of this mess and give you a fifteen-minute head start. By the time they see the smoke, you should have the camp surrounded. Oh, and be careful," Nick advised. "The Vampires will be rising in the next few minutes so you may have more trouble than you want," he warned in his most stern voice, the one that meant his words should be taken dead seriously.

\* \* \* \*

Back at the plantation house, Alyssa and Dare searched the attic, going through boxes that had been up there since *Smith and Jason, Contractors* built the house. Dust, dirt and cobwebs covered Alyssa and Dare head to foot, their sneezes echoed throughout the cavernous room. And it seemed it was all for nothing.

Next, they moved to the lower floor. She started in the library, Dare in one of the many bedrooms near the servants' quarters. They had to make progress soon. After several hours spent going



through every tome, old and new, in Dare's extensive library, Alyssa wanted to give up. She had her fists clenched in frustration when Dare came into the room, whistling. "What are you so happy about?" she asked. "Did you find something?"

"I found another clue in one of the guest rooms Beau used the last night he was here. It was taped to the underside of one of the dresser drawers."

"Let me see," she insisted.

*August 27, 2005, Family is our one true source of strength. The answer lies with family. —Beau*

"I don't believe it," Alyssa whispered. "Could these clues really be that simple?" she said to Dare.

\* \* \* \*

Dare stood, dumfounded. Had the book's location just clicked inside her head? He'd read both notes and hadn't a clue as to what Beau had tried to say. But from the way she smiled, Alyssa must have a pretty damn good idea where to find it. After she filled him in though, he knew the real trick would be in how they retrieved it.

\* \* \* \*

Blake was stunned, all the deaths, all the evil acts committed just because of his father's manipulations, his only intent—to get Blake's attention. Well, he had it now. Blake vowed that he'd hunt his father down, soon, and make him pay for all the atrocities he'd committed during the last three decades he'd run loose.

While Cerri's clansmen gave them their head start, Keenan, Cerri, Blake and Jake followed the panther's scent toward the

campsite. They were far enough away to go unnoticed and in an ideal location to count the guards stationed throughout the base camp. Keenan and Jake counted ten men stationed in front of two log cabins that stood side by side. Blake and Cerri each counted seven men hiding within the tree line. All of the guards were either Were-bear or Were-cat.

Just as they wondered when the Vampires would appear, several geysers of dirt exploded from the earth. The odds now were heavily against them.

After changing into his wolf form, Blake and his small group hesitated, unwilling to move forward and expose themselves to the enemy quite yet. Their backup should arrive in five more minutes. It would be suicidal should the four of them charge into that deathtrap alone.

But it wasn't meant to be.

Upon rising, the Vampires must have sensed the foursome's presence and all hell, literally, broke loose. The Vampires hissed and then screamed a blistering warning at the guards' lackadaisical attitude. They'd let the enemy walk right in.

One Vampire seemed to be in charge of the situation, yelling, "Go after them, you fools."

Blake wanted to go after him, but he couldn't leave his comrades. As the lesser Vampires, Were-bears and Were-cats shot into the woods after the intruders, the master Vampire disappeared, apparently intent on getting out of harm's way.

Outnumbered five to one, the small group formed a tight circle, each guarding another's back, knowing that they'd be fighting everyone at once. Hopefully, Cerri's clan would arrive soon or they were dead meat. Maybe asking for a fifteen minutes head start had been a bit optimistic.

Seconds later, Vampires attacked. Even with the bears' great strength, and the wolves' speed and agility, there was a slim

chance they'd survive the onslaught without help.

The Vampires assumed they'd have an easy time taking down the three bears and the wolf. They hadn't counted on the flood of adrenalin in their enemies' systems though.

Meanwhile, the other Were-bear and Were-cat traitors awaited their turn to fight. Loosely circling the Vampires, the turncoats were ready to step in and slaughter the interlopers that were trying to destroy all their plans for the future should the Vampires fail. They didn't realize they were already cannon fodder. The Vampires had exploited the creatures, corrupted them and now that they were no longer useful, they were no longer the Vampires' concern.

Blake launched himself at the closest Vampire, gouging him with his claws and ripping into its throat with his teeth. A blood geyser spurted from the Vampire's wound, momentarily distracting the other Vampires long enough for the four of them to coordinate their attack.

Jake, Cerri, and Keenan dragged down the nearest prey, snapped their necks and, with their massive strength, ripped their heads off, tossing them away lest the blood taint them.

With only two Vampires left, the Were-cats and Were-bears moved in to take their places.

Blake's energy was quickly becoming depleted. He knew the others were just as exhausted, having used plenty of energy to destroy the panthers beforehand in addition to this latest batch of Vampires.

They needed reinforcements...now. As prearranged if things went to hell, Blake let out an ear-piercing howl, which further enraged their attackers.

Two corrupted Were-bears moved in, trying to pin Blake to the ground, but Nick's warriors arrived just as the bears were about to gut him. It definitely would not have ended well for

Blake had they succeeded. Nick grabbed one bear by the neck and tossed him a good thirty feet, straight into a large oak tree.

More evenly matched now, Blake bucked the remaining bear off his back and straight towards Cerri who, with one swipe of her claws, ripped the bear open from throat to stomach. He instantly crumpled to the ground at her feet.

Suddenly she was grabbed from behind. The power, the strength in the arms that were squeezing the life out of her, was immense. Everyone heard her mental anguish as she called for help. *Keenan*, she cried. *Help me*. She screamed his name over and over in her mind and he doubted she even knew it.

Keenan roared with rage, slicing at the attacking panther's throat, practically decapitating it so that he could get to his mate. He lumbered through the hoard of enemies and traitors, knocking them all out of his way in his hurry to reach Cerri.

Hands full, Blake, Jake, Nick and his warriors attempted to keep everyone from the battle about to commence between Keenan and the bear that was slowly choking the life out of Cerri.

When the traitors realized the newcomers were quickly dispatching them and the odds had turned, they began to retreat. Survivors and fatalities littered the ground. One of the survivors was bound to have the information Blake and Keenan needed.

Cerri was almost gone when Keenan managed to subdue the bear choking her to death. Using the same technique, Keenan reared back onto his hind legs and wrapped his arms around the bear, snapping his back in half as easily as he'd snap a pencil. Within minutes she had regained full consciousness and healed herself.

Several rogue Were-bears escaped their fates, but a few Were-cats were alive enough for interrogation. One way or another, the wolves would get the information they needed.

After healing Blake, Keenan and the rest of the clansmen,

Cerri had to rest. Curled up on a bed of leaves and moss, she fell into a death-like trance.

After properly staking the dead through the heart, part of the raiding party built a fire pit, gathered the remains and set the pit aflame. The rest of the warriors from Nick's clan were busy securing the cats that were well enough to be questioned, though they wouldn't live long afterward. The traitors had two choices, an easy death or a very difficult one. It depended solely on their level of cooperation while undergoing their interrogations.

After the bodies were nothing but ash, the captives were tethered together and forced to walk toward the shanties. Injured as they were and with so many guarding them, it made no sense to attempt an escape. They wouldn't get two feet before their guards brought them down.

The inside of the first log cabin was a living nightmare, its sole purpose to torture whichever poor victim they'd captured. All too well, Blake could imagine his mother chained hand and feet from the manacles hanging from the rafters as they used whips and wicked looking knives to get her to talk.

She had been chosen because of one evil creature's sick desire to see all his kin dead for disowning him when they learned how foul he was inside.

Not only were chains hanging from the center beam of the cabin, a medieval rack was in one corner and a melting pot filled with glowing white embers with an iron poker sitting amidst its fiery heat, just waiting for a victim.

Blake wasn't the only one disgusted with the atrocities this building had witnessed. All the warriors were standing in the doorway, looking inside the open space in horror, all of them enraged and sickened.

In the center of the room sat a homemade electric chair. There were straps for the victims' arms and legs to keep them

immobile. Perfect for grilling a person or just to keep a victim panicked at the thought that he or she could be electrocuted.

Jake held the end of the tether holding the prisoners as Nick and Blake strapped the first male into the chair. Keenan, meanwhile, taunted the man by picking up the white-hot poker.

Still holding the lead rope, Jake led their captives to the far corner of the room. "See if you can find more rope," he shouted toward the group of men still standing in the doorway, gawking. Eventually, several pieces of rope were found under a table covered with whips, daggers, hunting knives and several swords. One of the men—he thought his name was Leo—was the only man brave enough to go near the table. What did they think, that the knives were possessed and would attack if one went near them? Sheesh...

Jake and Blake pushed all the prisoners together and wrapped the rope around their waists, all the while, Keenan slowly approached the man strapped into the chair, still carrying the poker. Most of the prisoners faced Keenan and their clansman, seeing their fate should they remain silent about what they knew.

"What's your name?" Keenan asked.

The man was stuttering now, scared out of his mind. They thought they'd had everything planned. They should have known that when it sounded too easy, then something was definitely wrong. "J...John Howard."

At least that one was a question he actually had an answer for. What would they do to him when they finally realized he'd been recruited for this mission only, that he didn't know the why of it.

Hell, he was just doing a favor for a friend. If he hadn't been told the *Loup-garou* was amassing large numbers, not only of their own people but also Were-bears, with the intent of attacking his people, he'd still be safely back home with the rest of his

pride. No wonder Alonso hadn't gone to the council with this. It was all a sham, it had to have been. And where was Alonso? Well, he wasn't here at camp where all hell had broke loose, that's for sure.

"Well, John, let's start with you. And in case you're planning on lying to me, I'm not afraid to use this," he said, waving the poker inches from the prisoner's face. "You tell me the truth and Blake, here, will make sure you die without feeling any pain," Keenan promised.

"Nick, can you go check on Cerri? She took one look inside this place and ran out the door. Keep an eye on her. Who knows how many decided to stick around to finish whatever these creatures had planned?" Keenan asked.

\* \* \* \*

Not used to taking orders, but understanding Keenan's worry, Nick did as he was commanded. It may have sounded like a request, but it was most definitely an order. Nick found Cerri sitting at the edge of the tree line staring at the cabin crying.

"He's going to torture that man, isn't he?" she asked Nick.

"I doubt it will come to that. He can instill the fear of God into an atheist without ever laying a hand on them."

"Killing to defend yourself or your people is one thing, but torturing people...doesn't that make us as bad as the enemy we hunt?" she wondered.

Nick thought about her question a total of maybe ten seconds. "What you need to realize is that this isn't about just you, me or our prisoners in there. Beneath it all, it's Humanity that we are protecting and we must do everything we have to in order for them to survive. It's as simple as that."

She nodded in understanding. "Maybe this goes against the

grain because I'm a healer at heart. I don't like inflicting pain, but I do it so often when we have to defend ourselves that sometimes I'm not sure who the real me is," she admitted.

"What you are is a healer. Tell Keenan that you'll be staying at home from now on, to patch up his warriors because that's your true calling. He'll understand, Cerridwen. If anyone can understand, Keenan will. You're his mate. Making you happy and safe are his main concerns." When she just looked at him askance, Nick laughed and admitted, "Well, he just might want a whole lot of loving, too."

"If you need to get back in there, I understand. But I just can't go back in there."

"No, Cerri. I'd just like to sit here near you and take a long break. Besides, after today who knows how long it will be before we see each other again."

\* \* \* \*

Keenan looked away from John, toward the rest of the prisoners. "Jake, will you leave a few of Nick's men to guard the prisoners and check out the other log cabin? Maybe they left something behind we can use to find Blake's mother."

"Sure, boss. I'll retrieve everything they left behind and go through it with Cerri and Nick. Three of us out there should be a detriment if someone is still out there watching."

After Jake handed over his prisoners and left the room, Keenan's eyes focused on the man strapped to the crude-looking chair. "So shall we continue?"



## Chapter Twenty-One

“How are you involved in this?” Keenan demanded. John swallowed, then licked his lips before he answered. “I was lied to. I was told the wolves and the bears were amassing an army to take over our people. I couldn’t let that happen.”

“Who told you this? Was your council involved? Who’s in charge?” Keenan’s rapid-fire questions did not give the cat a chance to speak.

“Let him answer what he can,” advised Blake who’d been watching Keenan closely in case the rage he felt erupted. What must it be like to be so intimidating without any effort? Keenan had long since dropped the poker to the ground. Yet, Blake doubted that their prisoner even noticed, he was ready to piss in more ways than one.

“Look,” John began, “I was just defending our people.”

“Then what in the hell is up with all this?” He gestured around the room, pointing toward the torture devices.

“I don’t know. I swear it. I just got here an hour before you and I wasn’t allowed in either of these houses.”

“Which clan do you belong to and how do we get in touch with your leader? I’ll let him deal with you since you didn’t actually kill any of my people.”

“Her.”

“What?”

“Our leader’s a woman. Her name is Fern Cecere. We’ve been living in Lafayette. She’s going to be pissed if I give you our pack’s location.” He paused, realizing he had no choice if he wanted to live. “I’ll give you the address, but she doesn’t like technology, not even a phone so that’s the only way you’ll reach her.”

Keenan nodded in agreement. “I’ll send an emissary from our people as well as one from the wolves.” Turning toward Leo, Keenan demanded that the next prisoner be brought to him and that John be tied up hand and foot and left in the opposite corner from his compatriots.

Leo brought over the cat that had attacked Blake and Keenan in Beau’s house. He probably knew a lot more than John had, but he was more than likely just another lackey, dispensable to his superior. All the prisoners probably knew just bits and pieces of information, but every little bit helped when trying to form a clear picture of what was going on.

Not that their foe would give anyone he considered beneath him information worth anything. But maybe, just maybe, someone knew someone who knew something. Rumors abounded everywhere, no matter what species one belonged to. The hard part was sorting fact from rumor.

The next prisoner fought so hard it took three people to strap him into the chair. Blake knew he was definitely going to be uncooperative. Keenan asked his questions anyway.

“What’s your name? What pack do you belong to?”

“Go to hell,” he shouted, spitting at Keenan in his wrath.

“I don’t think so, but if you don’t start answering questions that’s where you’ll be within the next few minutes.”

“I’ll die regardless. So why should I tell you anything?”

"Aye," he said with a nod. "That's true. But the question you should be asking yourself is how painful you want your death to be."

"What?" he laughed, "Come on. I'm an old bear myself. Do you really think you can scare me?"

Keenan nodded to Blake who went over to the table and picked up a knife with a curved tip.

"Well, I know of one body part you might miss, it will be extremely painful, but won't kill you...well, right away anyway," Keenan promised.

It sickened Blake that Keenan might have to follow through on his threat just so the others would be more receptive to his questions. He knew Keenan felt the same. Why he should pity this man when he was the one who'd attacked them at Beau's house was beyond him. Maybe because he knew deep down that Alyssa might never look at him with love in her eyes if he did this thing.

"Now, tell me your name," Keenan demanded again.

The man just looked straight ahead, defiance in his posture, arrogance on his face. He definitely knew something or he'd have at least told Keenan his name.

"Fine, for every minute you waste, Blake will cut off a finger, when you run out of fingers, he'll amputate your crotch. First, one ball, then the second. You mess up on the third question, the whole works fly out the window. Now, who told you to search Beau's house?"

The man was silent for almost a minute, but after seeing Keenan nod to the wolf, he decided he was a coward after all. He'd apparently rather a quick, painless death than suffer having his body parts removed one by one. "Roland and I got our orders from the Vampire that sent us in to battle you earlier. As soon as we were out of sight, fighting you, we realized he'd disappeared, ran away to save himself, or follow the next step in

the grand plan. Who the hell knows?"

"When were you given these orders? Was it in person?" Blake asked.

"We had your leaders' phones bugged several months ago while you were all in Canada. As soon as you called him to tell him about your mother, we were on to you."

"Every time you talked to him to give him updates, someone else was listening. I don't know who it was. It could be the person who gave us our orders or someone higher up in the group. That's all Roland told me. Oh, also that your pilot was feeding him information. We came to New Orleans because that's where Blake was heading."

"How'd you find the house?" asked Blake. Sam was not going to be happy to learn that his phone was tapped. But maybe they could use it to their advantage. It'd be up to Sam to decide the best course of action.

"I looked up the address you gave to Sam when you called him this morning and found out who the previous owners were through the deed, which was registered with the Sixth District Assessor's Office."

"They just told you that information?"

"Of course they didn't. I had to do a little breaking and entering, but I got the job done." He was crowing now, seemingly delighted with his recent criminal activities.

"Let me guess, you're a burglar by trade," Keenan said abruptly.

"It's only a hobby of mine. I don't even fence what I take. I do it for the challenge. Hell, I only break into a person's house when there's someone home. It gives me a rush."

Keenan shook his head, disgusted. "Are they holding anyone captive?"

"I have no clue what you're talking about," he vowed.

"Well, your good buddy, my brother Roland, sure as hell knows."

Blake could feel Keenan getting enraged again. Just thinking about that poor child, mutilated, her legs still missing had his beast ready to tear Roland apart.

"He was the one that set the trap by murdering that child. Which, in turn, lured one of the members of Blake's pack into running to the screaming child's rescue as she was being ripped apart and everyone else went into hiding to escape the same fate, abandoning their homes," Keenan continued.

"I swear, I know nothing about that," he said, his voice quivering.

Blake felt the man's horror at being associated with anyone who would butcher a child just to lure someone away from safety.

"Where's Roland?"

"Last I heard he was on his way back to Tucson. Said he had other business to see to."

"And that's all you know?" Keenan asked.

"Look, all I was told when I got here this morning was to go back and lead you to this area. We had no idea what was in this building. Or what they planned if any of you were captured. But we were under the impression that what we were doing was to save our people from you."

Keenan shrugged, letting some of the tension ease from his shoulders. Killing this man would be wrong. Keenan decided he would turn him over to his leader just as he would John. "One last question, make that two. Who is your leader? Where do I need to send you?"

"Actually I don't have one. I was banished from the pack because of my hobby."

"Then who's the leader of all Were-cats?"

“Rafe Castillo. Last I heard his pack was in southern Georgia.”

Keenan looked at Blake, “I assume you can track him down?”

“I shouldn’t have a problem with that so long as he’s not using an alias or purchased his property through a dummy corporation.”

“Then I guess he goes with us until we can turn him over to this Rafe guy.”

“Go ahead and untie him, Blake. Put him next to John.” As Blake loosened the straps and the man began to hobble away, Keenan turned to him and asked one more time, “What the hell is your name?”

He looked at Keenan with hope-filled eyes, “Marcus Casadas,” he answered, then plopped down next to John, patiently waiting to be tied up again. Thankful for now that he was still alive.

\* \* \* \*

In the log cabin next door, Jake looked around in amazement or maybe it was utter shock. It was decorated like a bordello. Red velvet drapes covered the windows and walls from floor to ceiling. The only piece of furniture in the main room besides a small table was a massive cherry wood sleigh bed, and it, too, was covered in red velvet. The only light in the room was an old oil lamp, sitting on the three-legged table, which was propped up with a tree limb the thickness of a man’s arm.

If anything were hidden here, he would find it. Jake took great pleasure in ripping the fabric off the walls and windows. Perhaps there was a wall safe hidden behind all the red velvet. Or a secret entrance to the log cabin, a back door he could escape from if necessary. Whoever lived here brought tackiness to a new

level as far as he was concerned.

After removing all of the offensive red velvet from the walls, Jake tossed it out the door of the guest cottage. He needed to move around and all the velvet was not only getting in his way but was nauseating.

Jake searched the walls. It was obvious if anything was in the walls it would have to be well hidden because he couldn't find any sign of it. There were no hollow sounds, no seams that showed a cutout of any type.

In fact, the walls weren't very thick at all so he doubted anything could be stored in them, but he'd have Blake check once he was finished searching the room himself. Two sets of eyes were better than one. And maybe Blake would find something he missed.

Next came stripping the bed. He threw the blood-red coverlet out the door as well as its matching satin sheets. Next went the mattress and box spring, just leaving the wood frame of the sleigh bed to investigate.

Jake pulled the bed into the center of the room and walked a complete circuit around it. It was on his second trip around the bed, he found the drawer hidden in the fancy Celtic scrollwork covering the headboard.

A Celtic knot was slightly raised from the rest of the carvings, and when pressed, a good-sized drawer opened on the backside of the headboard. It wasn't deep, maybe three inches, but it was at least eighteen-inches high. Most definitely large enough for the file he found sitting in there.

After locating the file, Jake shoved the bed back against the wall so he could search the rest of the room. In a few minutes, he noticed a draft coming up from the floor. Closer examination revealed a trap door under a throw rug at the foot of the bed.

Well, he'd finally found the bolt hole that the Vampire used to

leave the compound to feed every night. Not that it mattered now. He was probably on his way either to where Jeanne was being held or to join Roland to wait for the *exchange*. Hell! For that matter they could both be at the same place.

\* \* \* \*

Keenan turned to the rest of the prisoners and asked, "Do any of you have anything more to add?"

They shook their heads. But after a moment, one of the men in the forced huddle cleared his throat. No more than sixteen, the kid was lanky, he still had a lot of meat to put on his bones before he'd begin to fill out.

"My father, sir. He said our older brother was being sent to guard someone important in Tucson, Arizona. That's all I know. But it came from my pa so I don't know if it's the truth. You killed him out there, the male panther that attacked you from the trees. My aunt was the other one."

Keenan didn't know whether to be appalled that he'd killed this young man's father and aunt or to be comforted with the knowledge that their influence on the teenager was finished.

"I'm glad they're gone, sir." The boy's sigh was heartfelt. And Keenan felt a little better about what he did. Obviously, the boy had been terrified to disobey his father and aunt.

"What's your name, son?" Keenan asked gently.

"Constantino Elizondo, sir."

"Who's your pack leader?"

"My father was, sir. He separated from his group many years ago, before I was born. I don't have anyone now. My brother is just as bad as my father and I don't want anything to do with him."

"We'll see what we can do to see you raised with loving foster



parents,” Keenan promised.

The boy nodded, tears of gratitude spilling down his cheeks. He lowered his head, not wanting the others to laugh at him for crying like a baby.

But what they saw was a boy with no family and a bear with more compassion and honesty than they'd ever thought possible. How could they have been led to believe such terrible things? Were they that susceptible to the evil of others? Or were they in their own way just trying to be heroes? In any case, they'd been in the wrong, they all deserved whatever punishment was meted out for putting all of their people at risk. For putting Humanity in harm's way.

\* \* \* \*

Cerri slept curled up at the base of one of the oak trees lining the tiny campsite. Nick stood guard, all too aware that trouble was coming, he could smell it. None too gently, he shook Cerri awake and, when she moved to speak, he shook his head and held a finger to her lips to silence her.

*Keenan, she shouted through their mind link, Nick feels something wrong out here and now that I'm awake I feel it, too. There's a Vampire nearby. He's watching from the trees opposite me. I can feel him.*

*I hear you. I'll send Nick's men out. Blake and I have everything covered in here. You need to warn Jake, he hasn't returned yet so he still must be in the log cabin next door.*

*Okay. But tell everyone to be careful. This one feels real nasty.*

\* \* \* \*

Jake felt the eyes of something evil focused on him. Presumably, it was the Vampire who slept in this house of horrors and he'd remembered the file he'd abandoned in his haste to reach safety. Well, too damn bad, he wasn't about to give it up. Especially not to a creature that got his kicks out of torturing people.

If he went below the log cabin, he'd be trapped there, which was what the Vampire planned. So the only other option was to walk out the door as bold as he pleased and wait for the Vampire to attack.

Just as he opened the door, a bear threw him to the ground. From the scent, he realized Nick was the one on top of him. But he wasn't moving, he was barely breathing. He couldn't find any wounds, he wasn't dripping blood anywhere. What the hell had happened?

Jake shoved the bear off of him, just as he began the change. It began in his mind first, the certain knowledge that he needed to change now. Then he felt the wrenching as bones grew, reshaped. The painful stretch of muscles and tissues and the itchiness as his body hair grew out. Last to change were his face and hands, his fingernails grew into claws. His teeth elongated, curved, then thickened into fangs. Finally, he developed a bear's snout where a Human nose had once been.

As Jake lumbered out of the log cabin and into the clearing, he saw the Vampire holding Cerri by the neck. How did he get the drop on them? She would have felt his presence just as he had. He'd have to worry about Nick later. Right now his main concern was getting Cerri free. From all corners of the yard, Nick's men appeared. They must have found a trap door in the other cabin and made use of it, heading into the woods and fanning out in order to get the drop on the Vampire.

Dressed like a dandy from the Victorian Era and with his long, lanky, hair tied up in a black ribbon, the Vampire stood

bent over Cerri, his mouth poised just above her throat. The bears could not, would not, ignore a threat like that.

Everyone stopped his or her forward movement, unsure what to do about the situation. Keenan stood inside the torture chamber, unable to do a damn thing to help his mate. It was up to the others to help her.

Blake step behind Keenan and whispered in his ear, "How are you at sniping?"

Keenan just looked at him, confused. "What do you mean?"

"Well, there's a high-powered rifle with a sniper's scope leaning against the wall behind the door. I saw it when we first walked in. It might slow his responses down enough that she'd have a chance to escape while the others took him down."

Keenan swore, all too aware of his shortcomings. Shooting was one of them. "I wish I could say I was a fair shot, but I'm not. I won't risk Cerri's life by accidentally shooting her instead."

"Well, then," he replied, "it's a good thing I'm a very good shot. Want me to wound it or try to go for the kill shot?" Blake asked.

The answer was an easy one for Keenan. No matter how much he wanted the Vampire destroyed because of his threat to Cerri, they needed information anyway they could get it. "Wound him. There are enough men out there to subdue him. We'll chain him to the wall in here."

"I'll need him distracted if I want a clearer shot."

"I'll tell Cerri. She'll think of something."

Blake nodded and raised the rifle, waiting for his chance to fire.

*Cerri, honey, I need you to distract him for a minute.*

\* \* \* \*

Cerri felt Keenan's confidence that she could find a way to do as he asked. *Okay. And I'll be careful*, she promised before he even had a chance to tell her so. She hoped Keenan couldn't feel her worry, her terror. She was doing her best to dampen her emotions so that the Vampire wouldn't attack once he sensed the adrenaline rushing through her bloodstream. He was powerful enough without her Were-bear blood strengthening him.

"You know, you're surrounded don't you?" she said to the Vampire, her voice hoarse from the strength of his arm wrapped around her throat. He stood just behind her, sort of bent over her. He was dying to bite her. He was just waiting for an excuse.

"They won't come near me so long as they know you're in danger. If I drink from you, you're dead either way," he said confidently.

"And if you drink from me, so are you. You'll never escape here alive. Seems we're at a standoff." After a moment she quietly added, "Or maybe not," and with all her strength, kicked back into the Vampire's knee, making him stumble. She felt the Vampire begin to drag her down before she ever heard the shot fired.

When the Vampire refused to let her go, she grabbed his balls from behind and ground them into the dust. He abruptly let her go and she rolled to safety.

Keenan stood in front of her and pulled her to her feet as ten men, some of them former prisoners, took the Vampire into the cabin and chained him to the wall. "Now maybe we'll get some answers," he said. He wrapped his arm around her waist and guided her into the chamber so that he could see that she was safe.

"You'll have more than answers, I found the file he came looking for," said Jake, smiling at the stunned expression on everyone's faces.

“You mean he ran for it without taking it with him? Everything that might lead us to him and his partners?” Blake asked incredulously.

Jake shrugged, “Apparently, he finally remembered it. I think he was a little pissed that I tore apart his bordello. I could feel him staring holes through the cabin walls. Oh, hell. Nick...” then Jake was running back out of the cabin and over to where he’d left the unconscious bear.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

Alyssa giggled with joy. She wanted to hop up and down, shout out to the world that she knew exactly where the book was now. Well, sort of. It was only a matter of doing a thorough Internet search and they'd know where to find it. Blake could handle that with his eyes closed. There wasn't much difference between searching for someone, whether they were alive or dead. It was just a matter of knowing what resources to use.

They were looking for a mausoleum. The Desjardin family mausoleum, which was located somewhere here in New Orleans. That's where they'd find the Druid's book. She felt it down to her soul. "I finally figured out the clues." She explained to Dare again. "It was right in front of us all along. I believe Beau left the spell book inside his family crypt. This last clue tells us it's with his family. We need to find out which cemetery their ashes have been interred at, and we'll find the book."

"It can't be that simple," said Dare, amazed.

"I could be wrong, but I don't think I am," she responded.

"It's one of the best ideas we've had so far. And it makes sense," Dare admitted.

"Let's just hope Blake can find the right cemetery. We're down to only two more days before the exchange is supposed to

be made.”

Alyssa was worried about Blake, anxious to hear from him. It'd been hours since they'd severed their mental link and she felt bereft without his touch.

“Well, Blake and Keenan may have fortune on their side tonight and find out where those bastards are holding Jeanne.”

Alyssa nodded. She'd feel much better once she'd heard from Blake. What was taking so damn long? Irritated and tired after spending all day and most of the night looking for the ancient tome, she excused herself and went to her room for some much needed sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Cerri stood off to the side as Blake and Keenan approached the Vampire they'd put into the manacles. She shuddered, her thoughts going back to the last few minutes. “Keenan, I'm going next door to take a look at Nick, make sure he's okay.”

Keenan's eyes met hers from across the room and he understood she needed to put some space between herself and the creature that had almost killed her. Besides, let her do what she was born to do, to heal those in need. Keenan nodded. *Take your time*, he told her. *Take as much time as you need, but for me, try to stick close to Jake for now. Okay?*

*I'd rather not be alone right now anyway.* She looked toward the Vampire, open hatred written on her face. *Find out what you can from that creature, then destroy it before it has a chance to hurt anyone else.*

Keenan knew an order when he heard one. And this was one order he would follow.

When Cerri reached the other cabin, Jake sat next to a naked man who had been heavily sedated. Jake looked up at her as she

walked into the room. “How in hell did the Vampire manage to knock Nick out?” he asked.

“He had a hypo full of Ketamine. In large enough doses it can immobilize the patient. We Were-beings have such a high metabolism it would take a hefty dose to keep Nick out this long. He was on his way to warn you when the Vampire came screaming up behind us and shoved the needle in his back. I don’t know how Nick even made it to the cabin door the way he was staggering there at the end.”

As if he knew they were talking about him, Nick began to groan. “What the hell happened?” he growled.

“I think you were coming to save me before you fell asleep.” Jake gave him a cheeky grin and a wink. “Thanks,” he said. Unable to keep a straight face any longer, Jake chuckled.

“Ugh. No problem.” Finally realizing just how exposed he was—literally, Nick looked to Cerri and cleared his throat. “Do you think you can bring me my clothes and toss them in here so I can get decent before Keenan comes and rips my head off?”

Cerri just rolled her eyes. “I see naked people all the time, Nick. It’s no big deal.”

“Keenan might not feel that way and the way I feel right now, I don’t want to take the chance of pissing him off.”

*Men could be such domineering asses*, she thought as she turned around and headed back into the woods to gather up Nick’s clothes, Jake trailing behind her. Rather than stick around and watch Nick get dressed so she could make sure he showed no ill effects of the sedative, she just tossed his clothes into the room at his feet, shut the door and headed back to the other cabin to watch the interrogation.

\* \* \* \*



The Vampire was bleeding from several cuts to his arms and legs when Cerri and Jake entered the cabin. Keenan stood in front of him, watching the blood drip from the wounds. "Now, tell me," he said, "where is Roland?"

The Vampire just looked at Keenan with hate-filled eyes, spittle dribbling down his chin, determined to get free and kill every living being in the camp. Eventually his wounds would heal and he'd never have to say a word. Soon enough the Vampire would rule the world, feeding off Humanity and their protectors alike and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it.

Jake stepped up to the Vampire, waving the file just out of his reach. "Don't bother with him. Let's read for ourselves what was so important it had to be hidden."

Blake took the file from Jake and sat on the floor to read. Mostly it was legal paperwork, deeds to different properties in the name of a corporation called Darkness Unlimited, a register of informants and a list of phone numbers with a set of initials scrawled beside each number. The information was damaging indeed, and with the list of properties, they should be able to narrow down the locations where his mother was being held.

Blake couldn't wait to share his news with Alyssa. *Alyssa, baby. Wake up, honey. I have news for you.*

*I'm awake. What's going on, it's nearly five in the morning.*

*I know. Sorry this is taking so long. But we may have hit the Jackpot. We'll go over what I found when we get back. We should be there in just a couple of hours.*

*Well, I have news, too, so when you do get back here we can all have ourselves a little show and tell. Hurry home.*

*I will. Go back to sleep, I'll see you in a couple of hours.*

*Love you, Blake.*

*I love you, too, honey. How are you and our babies doing?*

*Just fine, I'm missing you is all.*

*Well, let me finish tying things up here and we'll head back.*

*Okay*, she mumbled, *see you in a little while*, and drifted back off to sleep.

Blake shook his head, amazed at how quickly she could fall asleep, unaware of all the eyes on him. What must he have looked like while speaking to Alyssa that would have all of them grinning? “What?” he said, pretending mild offense. When they all found their mates and bonded with them, they’d understand. Already Keenan was beginning to and he and Cerri hadn’t even shared a kiss as far as he knew.

Blake sighed and said what everyone was waiting to hear. “We have everything we need here. We don’t need that abomination anymore.” He set the file down on the table with the knives and picked up a short sword, walked up to the Vampire and stabbed him straight through the heart, the whole procedure took less than ten seconds.

Just to be sure that the Vampire stayed dead until he could be reduced to ashes, Jake picked up the battle axe hanging on the wall beside the weapons table and, with one mighty swing, took the Vampire’s head right off its shoulders.

Looking around at the prisoners sitting against the wall, Blake turned to Keenan, asking, “What do we do with them?”

Nick walked up to them, looking more like himself, the drugs apparently already out of his system. “I suggest you call Dare. He had a guest cottage renovated into a holding cell a few years back. *Just in case*, he said.”

“Now, who wants to clean up this mess?” asked Blake.

From against the wall, where he’d appeared to be sleeping, Constantino raised his hand. “I will, sir.”

It seemed important to the boy but it was messy work. He made the decision quickly, trusting his gut on this one. “Sure, and I’ll help you. Have you ever disposed of anyone’s remains

before?”

“No, sir. But I’ve watched my father build his *bonfires* too many times and they weren’t always for the enemy.” The boy shuddered.

His skin was prickled with goose bumps. From fear or disgust, Blake wasn’t sure, but if he were a betting man, he’d say it was a little of both.

“If this will be too hard for you, we won’t think any less of you,” added Keenan.

“No, sir, I *have* to do this. I have to try and make this right. At least in some little way, I’ll be helping after trying to hurt you and yours.”

Nick, Blake, Jake and Keenan exchanged glances on the sly, each of them proud of the boy’s bravery and integrity, especially raised the way he’d been.

“Well, I’ll call Dare,” offered Nick, “while you guys clean up. I’d suggest burning the corpse, then torching both of these cabins so they can’t be used again.”

\* \* \* \*

Dare was sound asleep on the couch in his office, the TV showing some infomercial about hair replacement therapy, when his desk phone rang. Making a face at the commercial as he walked across the room, the only thing on Dare’s mind was, “Thank God that will never be a problem for me.” Since the phone wasn’t going to answer itself, Dare picked up the receiver. “Hello. And do you know what in the hell time it is?”

“Well, hello to you, too, Dare.”

“Oh, sorry, Nick. I was asleep when you called. What’s going on?” he said, yawning down the phone.

“We have some prisoners and we are told that you have the

perfect place for them to stay and visit.”

“Ahh, yes. Haven’t had any guests in there yet. It’s about time it got broken in. How many will we be accommodating?”

“Seven will be sitting in a cell and one will need a room in the house.”

“Okay. He was curious as to why one would be treated as a guest, but he could wait until later to find out. “Not a problem. You guys heading back now?”

“Shortly. We just have to burn down the camp we were led to and dispose of some garbage. We need to call a meeting when we get back. Then we all need to catch some sleep.”

\* \* \* \*

Nine soot-covered men and one woman arrived back at Dare’s place at seven o’clock in the morning, surrounding seven men with hands tied behind their backs and a scruffy teenage boy who looked like he hadn’t eaten a decent meal in a very long time.

Leaving the others to settle the prisoners, Blake rushed upstairs to the room he shared with Alyssa. It’d been far too long since he’d seen her, held, her, pressed his lips to hers.

Alyssa was already up and moving, heading toward the bedroom door when it flew open and Blake swept in, picked her up in his arms and spun her around in circles. Alyssa smiled up into his eyes, easing some of the tension that had been riding him since they were last together. Just seeing her, being with her made everything better.

“What’s got you so happy? Do you know where your mother is being kept?” she asked.

“Join me for a shower,” he enticed. “Help me wash all this soot off. I just want to spend some time with you before we talk business. A little time alone to enjoy being with each other isn’t

too much to ask for after all we've been through in the past couple of days, is it?"

"No it isn't. Besides I'm not kissing you until you smell fresh and clean again."

Needing no further encouragement, Blake carried Alyssa into the bathroom. They took their time undressing each other, needing the brush of fingers as buttons were opened, the feel of skin touching skin, the soft sighs as they leaned against each other beneath the shower's spray. It wasn't easy to break a mental bond. It left the mated paired feeling bereft and incomplete. The need to touch each other, to reaffirm their bond was as instinctive as saying their mating vows had been.

But there wasn't time for anything more than simple caresses as they bathed each other. Later they'd make some time to be together. Besides, they both needed sleep more than anything else right now.

After stepping out of the shower and donning fresh clothes, the pair went downstairs to the formal dining room. It was the only room in the house where thirteen people could sit comfortably as the table was designed to seat twenty.

Cerri, Keenan and Dare sat at the table when Blake and Alyssa walked into the room. "Where are the others?" Blake asked.

"Nick and Jake are cleaning up, the rest of his crew wants to shower in shifts so there are always guards watching over our guests," said Dare, looking up from reading the file Blake had handed to him on his way through the house earlier.

"And the boy?" he asked.

Keenan looked up to speak with Blake, having broken eye contact with Cerri to do so. They must have been having a private conversation between themselves. He was sorry to interrupt the pair. They'd been through a lot in the last few hours and hadn't really had a chance to talk things through. Never mind that they

were mates and determined to get to know each other in the conventional manner, with dates, long conversations and the like, before exchanging mating vows. The very things he'd neglected to do with Alyssa. But there was still plenty of time for him and Alyssa to get to know each other. They had the rest of their lives.

"I invited him to join us. I didn't think you'd mind." Keenan, having already made up his mind about the boy, silently defended him.

Blake couldn't blame him. That was fine with him he agreed with Keenan.

"He's entitled to be here. He never actually attacked any of us, just kind of hung back. And he was the only one who volunteered any information without being coerced in some way, even after knowing what type of man his father was and what he was responsible for doing."

Blake could see the confusion on Alyssa's face so he wasn't surprised when she asked, "Who was this boy's father?"

"The Were-cat that manipulated the others into attacking us by lying about the threat we were to their species. His father is gone now, but his brother is still on the loose and the boy, Constantino, believes he may be guarding Jeanne," answered Keenan.

"To grow up terrified of your own relatives and too young to strike out on your own, must be a lonely existence. Who would you trust after being raised that way?" added Cerri.

After a few minutes of small talk, Constantino edged into the room, sticking close to the wall. Alyssa was the first one to notice that the boy held himself away from everyone as if he felt unworthy to be anywhere near them.

Blake could feel her intentions through the bond and heartily agreed.

Alyssa patted the empty chair next to her, "Come have a seat. We're just waiting on Nick and Jake for now. Nick's men will be drifting in and out to guard those down in the cells."

"I should be down there too, ma'am. It's not right that I'm able to be up here."

"Tell me this," she insisted, "if your father hadn't ordered you to stand guard at the camp, would you have been there?"

"No, ma'am. I don't cotton to what he does, but I'm not strong enough to go out on my own."

"Then you have every right to join us." Alyssa looked around the table, "Does anyone disagree?"

"No. He should be here. I bet he knows a lot more than he thinks he does. We just need to ask him the right questions. Then we can narrow down which property Jeanne is being held at," Dare replied.

"You didn't start without us?" Nick asked as he and Jake strutted into the room, smelling and feeling much better than when they had entered Dare's home.

"No, we were just about to get started. Let's get the most important issue out of the way first. My cook will have breakfast ready for us in about an hour. I told her to cook enough steak, eggs and biscuits to feed an army."

"Now, where should we begin?" asked Blake. He could feel his mate's excitement through the bond. Whatever she had to say would be important. He had no doubt in his mind his mate had found something while they'd been gone.

"Dare and I think we've located the Druid's Book. Well, not located it exactly, but we know where he put it, just not where the place is. That's where you come in, Blake."

"Start from the beginning and tell us what you found out."

"I started searching the library in case he stuck it amongst the hundreds of books already lining every wall in the room.

Dare was searching the guest rooms and old servants quarters. He found another note.”

Dare retrieved the note he’d placed in the file and passed it around for everyone at the table to look at.

“Combine that with the note that sent you to New Orleans and we think that he might have stashed it in his family’s crypt. We need you, Blake, to find that crypt,” said Dare.

“I’ll get right on it. Now for our news,” said Blake. “Dare has a file with some very interesting facts in it.” Blake went on to tell exactly what they’d found in the file. “It includes deeds to several properties in Tucson, where Constantino believes his brother was sent on some secret mission.”

“If my father would trust anyone with the information about where to find this lady, it would be my brother.”

“First thing we need to do is find a way to contact Sam without calling him directly.” Keenan reminded Blake.

“Why don’t you just e-mail him,” added Constantino.

Blake was proud of the young man, already he was finding his feet.

“Why can’t you just call him?” asked Dare.

“Apparently his phone’s been bugged since that fiasco in Canada several months ago.”

“That was just another little piece of info we gathered last night,” added Keenan.

“Oh, shit,” Dare muttered. Blake couldn’t have said it any better himself.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

“We can’t e-mail him directly, Blake, just in case someone’s hacked into his e-mail. But we can e-mail Jack. He’s staying with Sam and Elizabeth because of the babies.”

“You’re right, Alyssa. Thanks for the advice, Constantino.”

The teenager swallowed, nervous at being the center of attention, but pleased that they took his suggestion seriously and considered it a good one. How come most adults didn’t think teenagers could contribute anything worthwhile? Or maybe it was just his family that was that way. “You’re welcome. Um...you can all call me Tino, if you want. That’s what my younger brothers called me when they were little.”

Keenan jerked his head toward the teen, “You have younger brothers?”

Tino blinked back the tears welling in his eyes. “My father killed them in a fit of rage about six months ago while they were sleeping. I was on guard duty so I wasn’t in our cabin to protect them from him. I was beaten because he said I left everyone unattended and was off fooling around while the *Loup-garou* had sent in an assassin, but I could smell his stench in their blood, all over their little bodies. They were only seven years old.” He was openly crying now, tracks of tears running down his cheeks.

Cerri sighed. “It’s damn good he’s already dead or I’d kill

him myself. And so would everyone at this table. It never should have happened, Tino.” Everyone nodded, including Nick’s men who had entered the room silently as he told his horror story.

“We all swear to you here and now, you’ll never have to fear anyone you live with ever again,” vowed Keenan.

“You get in touch with any one of us if you ever feel that something is wrong in your life or with your loved ones and we’ll be there to back you up, no questions asked,” added Nick.

Tino hated letting people see him cry because his father always beat him when it had happened in the past. But he knew it was all right to cry in front of these people. They wouldn’t consider him a weakling and maybe one day he would prove to them that he wasn’t like his father and older brother. He would not be like them. He’d finally been given hope that there was another way to live other than as the monsters his family had been. He would become a good man, a good leader if given the chance, smart, honest, strong and compassionate. And he’d do what his family had not, be a protector of mankind.

He was still pulling himself together when the cook announced that breakfast was ready and if they wanted to eat they could help bring in the platters of food. She wasn’t anyone’s waitress. She got paid to cook, not serve. They all had a good laugh, which broke the tension.

\* \* \* \*

After eating, Blake shot off a quick e-mail to Jack, telling Sam to get in touch with them right away, that they had a situation and he was not to use any phone or computer that he would normally have had access to since the incident in Canada. He was well aware that time was growing short for them to find the both the *Book of Spells* and his mother. He could virtually hear the ticking

in his mind as time counted down.

While they waited for Sam to call, Blake got to work looking for the Desjardin crypt, using the Internet to access several databases for the New Orleans cemeteries. Eventually, he hit pay dirt. The Desjardins owned and maintained three mausoleums in New Orleans. The trick was to determine which one belonged to Beau's family. "Dare, do you know how long the Desjardin family has been in the area?" Blake asked.

"Beau told me once that his pack has resided in the area since before the Louisiana Purchase while the area was in the hands of the French. It had to be at least the mid to late 1700s."

"So we might be able to narrow it down to one of the oldest cemeteries in New Orleans that has a crypt for the Desjardin ancestors." After a few minutes, Blake spoke up. "Here we go. St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 has had a mausoleum assigned to the Desjardin family since the early 1800s. It's got to be the one."

*We're one step closer now. I can feel it, Blake.*

*I think so, too, and maybe with Tino's help we'll be able to narrow down which property my mother is being held at—if she's still alive or hasn't already been turned Vampire herself.*

*You can't think that way, don't lose hope yet. They think they need her. They'll try to keep her alive just so that they can kill her in front of you during the exchange.*

Keenan congratulated Blake, patting him on the back hard enough to make him stumble, then he walked away laughing.

Blake was still looking over his shoulder watching Keenan leave the room, his hand holding Cerri's, when Dare stepped up to him.

"Good job, Blake."

"Thanks, Dare. Now we have to retrieve it, without being seen breaking into the tomb in the middle of the night. We also need to have a plan ready to go when we narrow down the location of

where my mother is being held.”

“I agree. Nick, can you spare some men to fly to Tucson with us?”

“No problem. I’ll go along myself as well. I’m sure all the men here and a few other warriors in my pack will love the opportunity to do away with Tino’s brother, if nothing else.”

“We’ll need someone to stay here and guard the prisoners. I’ll have to have Sam contact the packs we know are located near here and see if they can pull guard duty.”

Dare’s home phone rang. Dare picked it up and gave Blake a thumbs up and handed over the handset on the cordless phone.

“Donovan here.”

“It’s Sam, what the hell is going on out there?”

“We’ve located the book, now we just have to retrieve it.

“You know for a fact where it is?”

“Not exactly, but it’s where the clues are pointing us at the moment.”

“What else?” Sam asked.

“Your phones are tapped and have been since you went to Canada this spring.”

“So was the attack in Canada only a distraction for their real purpose, to keep track of what we’re doing??

“Or it could be Elizabeth,” Blake suggested.

“What do you mean? What does Beth have to do with it?”

“We interrogated a few prisoners we have down here and Emmanuel is up to his neck in this thing. He’s the one behind the suggestion that the Druid’s book could be found in California at the compound. They deliberately lured my mother out there. So if he’s still after me and my mother, then chances are good he’s after Elizabeth as well. She is the one who managed to get away not once or even twice, but three times. He’s not going to be too happy about that.”

"You're right. Any other news you need to tell me?"

"Yes. We think we've narrowed down where my mother is being held. With help from one of the local Were-cats, he knows his brother was sent to guard someone in Tucson. We think that's where Roland went to lick his wounds, but he could have gone to any property that the corporation has deeds for."

Sam was quiet for a minute. "I'm sending a plane down with some men. Use them to retrieve the book and your mother. Then I want all of you, cats, bears and wolves to come back to my place. Send Alyssa with the book ahead of your trip to Tucson on my plane and you can take Keenan's plane with everyone else after your mission is completed."

"Wouldn't that put Bethie in danger though? Having all of us and the book there with you?"

"Yes, but we have a safe place to put her and Alyssa. No one knows about it, not even Beth."

"How did you manage that?"

"It wasn't easy. I had it done when she flew up to see Zach and Jessica a couple months after the attack. I made an excuse about having business I had to take care of if I was going to be able to stay home with her when the babies were born."

Blake laughed, fully aware that Sam could, and often did, run his import-export business from a laptop anywhere in the world. "When can we expect your men, Sam? Gimme some idea here."

"I'll make sure they're there by three this afternoon. It will still leave plenty of time for you to go pick up the book and then rescue your mother at dawn tomorrow. I know I don't have to tell you we're running out of time."

"I know, and thanks, Sam. By the way, have you heard anything from Sebastian?"

"Not yet, but I don't expect to hear from him for another day or two."

“Well, I hope he has some good news. I’ll e-mail Jack again when we’re on our way back to your place.”

“Take care of yourself and don’t do anything reckless,” Sam warned before hanging up.

\* \* \* \*

Sam’s people arrived just before three that afternoon, and Blake was there waiting for them at the gate when they left the plane. Ten men and four women, ready to put their lives on the line, not only to prevent the Druid’s Book from falling into enemy hands, but to rescue his mother as well. Blake was awed at the show of support, even though he knew only a couple of the wolves that Sam had sent to help, one of whom was Sebastian’s older brother, Zach.

“Hey, Zach, I’m damn glad to see you,” Blake said with heartfelt joy. With Zach along, things were looking up. He had an uncanny gift for strategy. In fact, when Zach set a mission in motion rarely was there a need for a contingency plan. And there was always a contingency plan.

“I wish it were under different circumstances. Amy misses you.”

“I miss your daughter, too. I’ll have to come visit soon, but I’ll have you know I have three of my own children on the way. We’ll have to wait until Alyssa feels up to traveling again after all this.”

“Oh my God, Sam didn’t tell me you were mated, never mind that she’s pregnant with triplets.”

Blake just grinned. “I’m so in love with that woman, there are no words to describe it. Speaking of which, she’ll be dying to meet you so let’s get all of you to Dare’s plantation. We have quite a gathering there already as I’m sure you’ve heard.”

"I know this is awful timing, but I can't wait to meet actual Were-bears and Were-cats. To know that we aren't the only ones left in this world aware and battling the Vampire is comforting if you think about it."

Zach and Blake were ahead of the rest of the group who trailed behind them staring at the line of limos waiting to take them and their gear to Dare's place.

"There are two cats I want you to meet in particular," said Blake. "One's a teenage boy who we're all quite determined find a decent home for, the other is an actual honest to god cat burglar."

"And the bears?"

"Other than Roland, who we're still hunting, all the bear's we've got staying at the place are great. I'd count them all as friends. Several bears did escape when we caught the cats, I'd have to say they were pretty much cowards. But the cats now, they put up quite a fight...all except Tino, the boy I told you about."

"Sounds like we are about to meet an interesting bunch of Were's."

"Now isn't that just like you, Zach," Blake laughed. "Understatements seem to just come naturally to you."

Zach shrugged. "It's a gift, what can I say."

\* \* \* \* \*

The group descended upon the plantation house en masse, all wide-eyed, most of them staring at the obvious wealth associated with a man who could maintain such an old house so exquisitely.

Some were amazed that any man could live in a house this size alone. He needed his own pack racing through the halls, sliding down the banisters, sweet-talking cookies from the cook

and generally creating a little chaos amid all this perfection. And the rest simply couldn't believe houses like this still existed. It was like taking a step back to a time when grand balls were held with great regularity, attended by the wealthy who were totally unaware that they were being entertained by someone who wasn't like them. Someone who wasn't completely Human.

Keenan paced the living area, surrounded by other Were-bear's, a couple of Were-wolves and one Were-cat, all in Human form. Once everyone had gathered, including the new arrivals, the group numbered twenty-five, a small army of accomplished warriors with a mission they could not fail. "It's about time you all got here. It's getting late. We need to get that book back and on Sam's plane. Then we need to come up with a strategy to get into the compound where they're holding their prisoner."

"As you can tell," Blake said to Zach, "Keenan is a little edgy. He feels responsible for what his brother has done and is raring for another good old fashioned fight with him."

Keenan turned to Zach, "Blake and I have already discussed this. We want five of us bears and five of you wolves to guard Cerri as she goes for the Book. She'll be carrying flowers as though she's visiting a relative at the cemetery. You'll need our strength and we'll need your agility and speed if all hell breaks loose. And I expect it to."

"Don't you think ten is a little excessive?" asked Zach

Blake turned to his friend, shaking his head. "You have no idea how ballsy this bunch is. It's better to be safe than sorry."

Zach nodded. "Whatever you two think is best." Turning to his team, he chose three men and two women from his compound in Canada. They were his people's best warriors, men and women known to guard the Council of Elders on their trips to the United States.

Nick looked over his people, all eager to have something to



do. All this inactivity was getting on their nerves. "Keenan and I'll be going, so that means I'll need three of you. You're all equal as warriors so I'll leave the decision up to you. Meet us out front in ten minutes and wear the suits I insisted you bring along. We'll be taking the limos and once we leave the cars we'll look like part of a funeral procession."

Zach stared at Nick, "So that's why you insisted we all bring black suits. Great idea. Who came up with it?"

"Actually, Tino did," he said pointing at the boy who was scrunched up in one corner of the couch, looking as if he'd rather have a root canal than be noticed.

"I couldn't have thought of a better strategy myself. You have the makings of a great pack leader one day," said Zach. "Since it was your idea, would you like to go along?"

"You mean, go with you to get the book, you'll actually let me see it?" He was seemingly amazed at these people's kindness and their trust in him.

At Zach's nod, the boy smiled. It was obvious to everyone what his answer would be.

Ten minutes later, they were all seated in the limos and heading for St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, all decked out in suits, even Tino. Blake, Nick and Keenan had sent Dare out this afternoon before their conversation with him to purchase one for the boy. There was no way they would have left him behind. Once they retrieved the book, with Tino's help they'd narrow down the location in Tucson where Jeanne was most likely hidden.

At the moment, Blake was getting a blistering lecture from Alyssa.

*I can't believe you wouldn't let me go with you. No one would have hurt me, not with all you he-man types there to protect me.*

*You knew it would have to be this way, Alyssa. Why are you really so upset?*

*I don't know, she sighed. Maybe it's just hormones running amok, but I am disappointed. It was my idea that got you looking there to begin with. I wanted to see you actually retrieve the book, not just hear about it.*

*I know, Alyssa, but you'll have plenty of time to peruse the book on your way to Sam's compound. You can study it to your heart's content if you want.*

*Hell no. I'm not even opening it. But I'll probably hold it the whole way there. I wish I could be there when you locate your mother, you may need me.*

*I know I will. But until this is over we need to be careful. You can't change forms until after the children are born so you're almost as defenseless as a Human would be. Only your speed and strength would give you an advantage.*

*Well, she huffed, that means I could run like hell then, doesn't it?*

She continued to argue with him through most of the drive to the cemetery, although he heard the resignation in her tone. What's done was done. He knew she was resigned to being left behind and had decided she should try and get some rest. Not only was she flying for the first time without him, but he would also be on a plane, heading into danger and there was nothing she could do to help him.

And she was furious with him for making decisions for her without even discussing them before hand. He winced when he heard her next thoughts while unashamedly listening in through their mating bond.

*He is going to put an end to this kind of stuff or our relationship is on the skids, triplets or not. I won't be left out of important decisions any longer. It belittles me and my worth as his partner, his equal. I can't be with a man who doesn't consider me his equal no matter how much I love him.*

Dusk fell as the limo convoy rolled up to the cemetery, but the gates were barred. "Bloody hell," said Keenan. "Didn't anyone bother to check what the hours of operation were?"

Blake was stunned. Didn't they do tours of these old cemeteries at night? Hell, Keenan was right, he should have checked what their hours were. But there was another possibility. "No, but we have a contingency plan," replied Blake, excitement lighting his eyes.

"Aye, and what's that Blake?" Keenan muttered.

"We jump the fence of course. It'll be dark enough in an hour or so. Why don't we go to find someplace to eat? We're all dressed up and by the time we get the check, we can break in, find the tomb, steal the book and run it back to Alyssa before getting on the plane."

"Sounds like a plan to me," chimed in Nick.

"Yeah," agreed Tino. "I could go for a pizza."

Keenan sighed. "Well then, let's all go eat, and use the time to find out where in Tucson we're heading later tonight."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Using Dare's name, they got a table at Antoine's, a Creole restaurant in the French quarter near the cemetery, but without reservations it took some time for them to be seated. It was while they were waiting for the main course to arrive that they asked Tino what he knew concerning his brother's whereabouts.

"Like I said before, I used to listen to my father and brother talk. Usually they didn't care if I was there or not. They were going to kill me like my brothers anyway so they used to talk pretty freely in front of me."

"So how do you know that your brother is in Tucson?" Zach asked.

"'Cause I heard my dad on the phone asking him how the weather was in Tucson."

"What else did you hear?" asked Blake

"Well, Alonso said something, then my father asked him if it was any cooler on the mountain than down in the city."

"That's great, Tino. That means your brother is on a mountain in Tucson," reasoned Jake.

"I found Roland's campsite on Mount Lemmon, about halfway to the summit," Keenan admitted. "He would have wanted to stay close to someplace familiar. I bet you'll find a

house up there that you have a deed for in your file, Blake.”

“So now that we know how you found out he was in Tucson, what makes you think he’s guarding someone?” asked Zach.

“Before he left, Alonso and my father were talking about how important what he was doing was. That he couldn’t let his guard slip, that someone would be searching for her.”

Everyone around the table nodded. *The boy is sharp*, was Blake’s thought. In fact, he was impressed with Tino and his ability to assimilate data. He was going to do very well for himself with the right guidance.

“Now that that’s out of the way, perfect timing actually since the food’s here. Why don’t we relax for a little while and enjoy our meal and our new friends?” interrupted Cerri, looking pointedly at the men who’d been grilling Tino.

Blake knew exactly what that look meant. The poor boy had been through enough, and if she hadn’t spoken up he would have been in tears again. Blake wasn’t sure she could stand that. And if they didn’t stop grilling the boy, she might just jump down their throats like their mothers never knew how.

\* \* \* \*

It was full dark when the group arrived back at the cemetery and they were all hyped, energized about the night ahead.

One by one they hopped the fence, spreading out to search for the Desjardin family crypt. From the far right, Tino let out a loud growl, a warning that they weren’t alone.

Tino felt and smelled another panther near. He knew that horrible stench from his toddlerhood. It was one of his father’s men, Marco. Marco was one bad dude.

Tino’s warning put everyone on alert. Of course, this mission wouldn’t be as simple as they’d hoped. Their luck wasn’t that

good. If one of the panthers were here, there was a good chance the bears were, too.

Blake whistled, the signal for everyone to fall back to their rendezvous point—Marie Louveau's tomb—to form a solid front against any attack.

Within moments they'd gathered at the Voodoo Priestess' tomb. "Do a head count," Blake ordered.

"I only count eleven," answered Marina, one of the warrior women that came with Zach.

"Who's missing?" he asked.

"Tino isn't here," Zach answered. "Would he have taken off after the panther?"

"If he felt that we'd accomplish the mission by leading the panther away from here, I'd count on it," replied Keenan grimly.

"He feels tremendous guilt about his family's role in this mess," added Cerri.

"First thing first, Tino may have bought us some time. Eight of us will look for the Desjardin crypt and get that book. Stay together. The other three will track Tino and save his ass if he needs it," instructed Keenan.

"I don't have to tell you to watch your backs, but I will," Blake reiterated. "Once you find the book, get in the nearest limo and go as fast as you can. Take the long way home. We'll all meet there after we find Tino." When no one seemed to move fast enough for his taste, Blake spoke to them gently, knowing that they were worried about the young man. "You all have your orders. Now go."

As if in taciturn agreement, Blake, Keenan and Cerri went to look for Tino while Zach searched for the Druid's book with the rest of the team.

\* \* \* \*

With their keen eyesight, Zach and his team didn't need flashlights to maneuver around the cemetery. Moving as one, the group headed toward the oldest section of the cemetery to look for the correct family vault. It was Marina who noticed the ghost white, stained tomb from a distance. And the half dozen Vampires surrounding it.

"Oh, hell," thought Zach.

"Battle stations," He ordered. "Two lines of three, one in the lead and one covering our backs. We don't know who else is waiting for us. I'll take the lead, Jake, you cover our asses."

Leading the way into danger, Zach felt adrenaline flood his body, the thrill of the hunt zinging through him. Finally, he was going to kick some butt for what the Vampires and whomever else they were working with had done to the innocents throughout this scheme.

"There are too many people walking through this area at night to risk changing in front of them. We go in using our strength and our speed. Find something to pierce their hearts. I don't care if it's just your pocketknife or a branch or your fists, but, by God, we will rid ourselves of these creatures. Let's just hope the book is still in the crypt and hasn't been whisked away yet."

The group approached the Vampires with caution, wondering why they hadn't made a move to attack. Something was off kilter here. He wondered what he was missing? Then it hit them. They were standing there all right, leaning against the tomb was more like it and every one of them had either a dagger through their heart or sharpened stakes.

Why hadn't they smelled their foul blood from this distance? Could it be because they were surrounded by blood and death? And who in the hell would have been able to sneak up on them

and kill them all? While they'd been enjoying a meal, someone had done their work for them. Then a thought occurred to him. The Druid's Book, was it still in the crypt?

"We'll get rid of the bodies in a minute. Let's get this crypt open and see if that spellbook is in here."

Two of the Were-bears shouldered Zach aside and pried the door open with their hands. It was dark and damp in the small chamber, but was meticulously organized. Rather than having a pit where the bones were eventually mixed together, the tomb was lined from floor to ceiling with shelves holding Desjardin family urns.

Nothing jumped out at him at first, no book just lying there in the open on a shelf. Then Zach remembered that the clue said it lay with family so he searched for the plaque indicating the last urn interred there. Sure enough, wedged behind the overlarge urn where both of Beau's parents were laid to rest together was a cracked, leather bound bundle. The age of the package was obvious. Zach was itching to open the wrapping and confirm it was the Druid's Book, but first they had to get out of there.

"Jake, take two of the Were-bears with you and help the other group look for Tino. The rest of us will head back to the plantation. Remember, no one must get his or her hands on this book. All of our lives are at stake." Everyone nodded, grave concern and even fear in their eyes.

\* \* \* \*

There was no sign of Tino, but the other panther's scent flew everywhere, he wasn't even trying to mask it. Hoping they'd find Tino by tracking the other panther, Keenan, Cerri and Blake set about hunting him down. The scent trail led them away from the cemetery, more than likely right into a trap. But they'd promised



Tino to back him up if he was in need. They would follow through with it whether they were walking into a trap or not.

Traveling through the darkened streets, the trio found themselves on edge. Why lead Tino all the way out here? Or could it be the other way around? Was Tino leading the panther away from the cemetery until the team retrieved the Druid's book? Tino couldn't outrun the panther forever. Eventually he would catch up to him, even masking his scent amongst the crowds walking the streets of the French Quarter. Perhaps that was the plan all along. Maybe, Tino was finally ready to face one of his own demons.

After another ten minutes on the panther's trail, they found him on St. Peter's Street, backed against the rear wall of Preservation Hall. With the noise of the crowd and the smooth sound of Jazz drifting out into the night air, no one paid any attention to the two. No one noticed as the teenage boy approached the older man.

"How long have you been following us?"

The man laughed. "Since you turned traitor to your family, boy. You thought you were so smart, taking up with the *winning* team. They won't win you know." He spat at Tino's feet, giving him a look of contempt. "Did you think your father didn't know you would turn tail and run at the first opportunity? They know everything. They know you'll have the book soon and they'll kill the woman for it."

"Not if I can help it." Tino lunged forward, pulling a knife from the scabbard stuffed down the back of his slacks, and stabbed the older man in the heart. The people close by never noticed a thing. No one saw as the boy caught the falling body in his arms as if the man had just passed out drunk. Nor did anyone notice the trio of onlookers proudly call Dare at home to have a limo pick them up, dead panther and all, at Preservation Hall.

\* \* \* \*

Within an hour after Tino rid the group of one more traitor, they were all gathered in Dare's living room, staring at the ancient tome of Magick. It was an Illuminated Manuscript written during medieval times. The book opened with an artistic depiction of the druid, Tadc, who'd originally transcribed the *Book of Spells*. The druid recorded his spells, chants and poems on vellum—dried sheep skin, which varied in thickness and color.

No one was brave enough to look through the book, and after one last sigh, Alyssa walked over to the coffee table where the book sat and rewrapped it in the cracked leather bag they'd found it in. Without looking at Blake, Alyssa picked up the Druid's Book and looked to Zach. "I assume the plane is fueled and ready for me?"

"Yes, the driver is outside waiting on you and three of my men are still on the plane, guarding it."

"You mean you left three men on there all day, just to make sure no one but me got on that plane?" For some reason that made her feel important, something she hadn't felt in the last few days. Everything was happening without her and she didn't like it.

"Well to be honest, nobody but you and that book."

She didn't feel so important now, more like an afterthought, which seriously pissed her off. If they had three men on the plane they didn't need her to guard the Book on its trip to New York.

When she would have argued about being shuffled away like she were a nuisance, he just raised his hand and said, "Sam's orders."

What could she say? Her packed bags waited outside. Alyssa tucked the book to her breast as she watched the driver load her luggage. She left the plantation behind, without saying a word to

Blake.

Blake tried to talk to Alyssa through their mental bond, but she quickly severed the link, too hurt by his lack of faith in her to take the chance at speaking with him. He'd lied to her when he said she was needed to transport the manuscript since she couldn't go into battle that she was the only one available. She refused to be in a relationship where one partner didn't trust the other. They were supposed to be partners, equals in all things, the marriage vows, once spoken, were supposed to ensure the mated pair would always remember to treat each other with respect.

And, to top it off, she didn't understand why she was even heading to New York when she wasn't needed there. But apparently she wasn't needed in New Orleans or Tucson either.

She'd go ahead and deliver the book to Sam, then she'd leave for where she *was* needed...back home.

\* \* \* \*

Blake watched from the circular driveway as Alyssa left in the limo. She never looked back and he had to wonder if she'd just driven out of his life. She'd rebuffed every attempt he'd made to communicate with her since he'd left for the cemetery and now she'd severed their mental link as well. Things looked dim and he had only himself to blame.

Maybe he should have told her he just wanted her safe. But now he realized she needed to be needed more than knowing the truth of the matter. How could he tell her what it would do to him if anything happened to her?

He respected her abilities, but she was vulnerable right now, an easy target for rogue Weres and Vampires. He knew Sam would protect her with his life, same as he would Elizabeth. Zach

had warned him to tell her the truth, but he thought he knew better. Now she would doubt anything he told her. He'd broken her trust and he didn't know how to earn it back.

\* \* \* \*

It was a sign of Blake's distress that he didn't sense Keenan coming up behind him, before he'd put his arm around his shoulders to offer what little comfort he could. "She'll come around. She can't stay mad at you forever."

"No, but she can stay pissed for a good long time. I should have told her everything. And still there are things she doesn't know about, things that we have already set into motion."

"She hasn't really given you an opportunity lately though."

"Still, she has a right to be angry with me. I broke our vows by not sharing everything with her."

"Have faith, it will work out in the end."

"Is that some Druid clairvoyance you've got going on there, Keenan?"

"No, I just know that she loves you as deeply as you love her. You'll work it out because neither of you will be happy until you do."

Keenan and Blake stayed outdoors for a few more minutes enjoying the night air—and the sounds of the swamp at the far edge of the plantation coming alive. Then they went back inside to finish plotting the raid scheduled to take place in Tucson in a few hours time.

Once back inside, Blake prepared their team for what to expect. "According to the blueprints of the house on the summit of Mount Lemmon, we're looking at a four thousand square foot monstrosity. It has more than ten exits if you include the second floor balconies, which anyone with our abilities will be able to

jump down from without injuring themselves.”

“How are we going to cover all those exits?” one of Nick’s men asked, “and find the hostage?”

“I’m glad you asked. Keenan had ten men fly in from Alaska this evening. They’ll be on the plane when we get there. They will guard all the exits to give us warning if anything comes up, guard changes, movement of the prisoner and the like so that we’ll be able to get out safely. I don’t need to remind you that tomorrow is midsummer’s eve and the spell is supposed to take place at midnight tomorrow night. Were-beings... time just ran out.”

“Where do you think they’re keeping her?” Jake asked.

“I imagine it will be an interior room, one with no windows.” Pointing toward the blueprints, Keenan added, “There are five rooms that match that description. Search them all and if you find nothing, search the rest of the house. I don’t have to tell you all that this place will be well guarded. In fact, we’re taking the cat burglar and Tino with us.”

When Nick opened his mouth to object about bringing the older panther, Zach added his opinion, “It’s a good strategy. Their showing up at the house may be enough of a surprise that they can get in close without causing any stir. Besides the *cat burglar* won’t cross us now that he knows what’s really going on, but at no time is he to be left alone. And guard Tino as well. His brother would like nothing more than to kill him, slowly, and painfully.”

“So how do we go in?” asked Jake.

“We’re going in as teams,” replied Keenan. “Five man teams entering through two upstairs balconies and three side entrances. Blake, Jake, Zach, Marina and I will lead the teams.”

“As I said before, Keenan’s men will protect all the exits and stop anyone but us from leaving the compound. Think of them as our insurance. We’ll be leaving no prisoners this time. Kill

whoever you run into, we'll destroy the corpses after and torch the house to get rid of the evidence," Blake ordered.

"Dress in black combat gear, make sure you're all carrying knives and stakes in your knapsacks and meet us out front in thirty minutes. It will take about two hours to get there so rest on the plane while you can," insisted Keenan.

"That goes for all of you, my people included. It's going to be a long twenty-four hours," added Zach.

\* \* \* \*

Alyssa sat on Sam's plush plane, stewing in her own anger. It was better than being afraid during the flight, but not much. She could blame this on Blake, too, he knew how afraid she was on planes and he'd put her on this one without anything to distract her. She was definitely not opening the Druid's Book, no matter how much she needed to keep her mind off the impending takeoff.

Sam's men were all burly with eyes that had seen too much damage and pain. They'd provided a secure, fire proof safe for the book as she walked onto the plane, which she promptly placed it into as soon as she could. Even if the plane crashed, that damn book would survive. She glared at the safe, knowing she'd gladly burn the thing if it weren't so important to her people.

It was the guards' responsibility now. Lowering herself in her leather reclining chair, Alyssa waited for the telltale warning that takeoff was imminent—the starting of the engines, to which she promptly responded by gripping the hand rests until her knuckles were as white as her too pale face.

Even though her mind was occupied with takeoff and she was mad as hell at Blake, she was still worried. By now they were

probably on their way to the airport to hop onto Keenan's plane, which was heading for Tucson to take on the group that had Jeanne in their custody. How many guards would they have to go through before they could rescue Blake's mother? How many of the team wouldn't survive the coming battle? As angry as she was at him, she still bowed her head and prayed that Blake and his mother would make it through safely.

\* \* \* \*

Blake was in the rear of the limo surrounded by his people's greatest warriors who were repeating the strategy they'd worked out beforehand over and over so everyone had it down pat.

His thoughts were on Alyssa though. How was she coping on the plane alone? What could he do to atone for his mistakes? How long before she was ready to forgive him? All he knew for sure was that he wasn't about to lose her. He'd fight dirty if he had to. She was his, the children she carried were his and it was going to stay that way. Decision made, he centered himself and concentrated on relaxing to conserve his energy for the battle ahead.

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

When the group arrived at the house atop the mountain, they were surprised by its design, assuming, for some reason, it would be made of timber. Instead, it was a Spanish Colonial. Even the outside, spectacular as it was, had several fountains, a pool and a Ramada that created a park-like paradise. Who would have guessed such evil lurked inside such a beautiful home?

From the blueprints, each bedroom was part of a suite with a connecting den and changing room. Blake and Keenan both felt Jeanne would be barred into one of the changing rooms. The dummy corporation had owned the property for more than a year already, long enough for some minor reconstruction, like adding a steel door to close in the closet area so that no one could escape.

The men separated into teams. Keenan's men surrounded the perimeter, watching the entrances and exits to the place, ready to move in if someone needed to be taken down. That left Jake's, Zach's, Marina's and Blake's to deploy. Heading in five different directions, the teams moved in with the two panthers trailing behind Keenan so he could keep an eye on them.

"Marcus," Keenan whispered, "get your ass up here and get us through these French doors without alerting anyone."



“Yes, sir, boss, sir,” he said mockingly.

Tino slapped the other panther upside the head. “Better damn-well show him some respect, you ass. He’s giving us a chance to make up for what we did.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he muttered, working the lock on the French door with his lock pick. After an almost silent click, Marcus swung the door open slowly. “Good, no alarms. Sloppy, sloppy, sloppy.”

Eerie silence filled the halls as they crept through the suite in search of the dressing room. The den in this suite had been turned into a torture chamber, just like the log cabin outside of New Orleans, with chains bracketed to the walls, whips hanging from hooks and knives displayed on a low table, but the dressing room was empty, the steel door open. One suite down, four to go, hopefully the other teams were having more luck. But why was the house so empty? There should have been guards patrolling both inside and outside the grounds.

Jake’s team wasn’t having any better luck. Except for an empty dressing room with a steel door standing open, it looked like a normal bedroom and den.

The entrance to the suite Blake had been assigned was located on an upper floor so using his powerful legs he jumped high enough to grab the banister on the balcony above him and pull himself over. The others quickly followed behind him. Using Marcus and his lock picking skills, they were inside their assigned suite within thirty seconds.

They heard low moans coming from either the den or the dressing room. Whatever was back there appeared to be in incredible pain. Signaling his team to use caution, Blake led the men through the bedroom and into the den. Everything seemed in its place if one considered what this room was designed for. It was pretty much a duplicate of the cabin they burned down

yesterday.

They heard the gut-wrenching whimpers again, this time coming from behind the bolted steel door that led into the dressing room. What was waiting for them in there? It could be a trap. He'd yet to see anyone guarding this place since they'd arrived.

What was found inside the locked room could only loosely be described as a man. His once blond hair was matted with dirt and blood. His face was a purple mass of bruises. Both of his lips were spit open. And if his aborted movements were any indication, he had several broken bones to go along with the cuts and bruises. Blake was surprised the man still lived.

"Help me," he whispered, "please." That was all he managed to say before the pain became too much for him to bear and he lapsed into unconsciousness, truly a blessing for the stranger in his current condition.

"We need to get him out of here. Get him down to Keenan's people to guard in case we find trouble. I'm going to keep searching for my mother. It will take at least two of you to carry him down. It'll be easier for you Were-bears to carry him, Leo. And, for God's sake, be careful with him." Before they could respond, he was already heading out the door. "The two of you, follow me."

Marina's team found trouble and lots of it. Blake's entire team heard the animal screams, smelled the blood and came rushing to her aid. She was in one of the suites and Vampires and Were-bears surrounded her and her team. She bled from a nasty puncture wound to her side and the Vampires bared their teeth in anticipation, waiting for their dessert.

The rest of their group, all eighteen of them, ran to the suite assigned to Marina's team, converging on the bloodbath, hoping to keep anyone else from being injured. Keenan stepped up

behind one of the Vampires closing in on Marina and snapped his neck, leaving him to fall to the floor, alive, but immobile, for now.

The rest of the team repeated the act, snapping the necks of the hungry Vampires, then they all took their sharpened stakes out of their backpacks and stabbed the Vampires through their hearts. By now the Were-bears had moved from the den toward the bolted closet door, also reinforced in steel.

Blake heard a scream come from inside. He knew that voice. It was his mother, Jeanne. His heart clenched. Fear clawed at him. What were they doing to her in there?

The enemy formed a wall of rogue Were-bears in front of the locked door, blocking the way, protecting whoever was inside torturing Blake's mother.

Zach had to hold Blake back or he would have charged into the bears without thinking and then he'd be dead. And so would his chances of spending his life with the woman he loved. He must not only live for his mother, but also Alyssa and their unborn children.

"Let the bears lead," suggested Jake. "They're matched strength for strength. Once the way is clear, us wolves can go in after your mother."

"You *know* it's her?" Blake had worried that he only wanted it to be her, that he only wanted her to be alive and almost close enough to wrap in his arms.

"I heard her scold me often enough as a kid. She's alive, and for now that's enough."

It took all Blake's willpower to hold himself back, but he managed. Jake made sense. Then he'd go in and do whatever he had to do to save his mother. Keenan and Cerri were the first ones to approach the Were-bears blocking the cell door. The others quickly followed behind them, ready to fight to the death if

need be.

Using his magick, Keenan instantly transformed into a huge brown bear, taking the guards by surprise. Cerri, standing next to him, used the guards' distraction to knee one of the Were-bear's in the groin.

Keenan stepped up to the guard standing directly in front of the door and snapped his neck with one twist of his heavy paws. Two guards lay incapacitated, leaving three more Were-bears to defend their master. The rest of Nick's men took out those three, leaving Jeanne's prison cell unattended.

Nothing could hold Blake back now. After throwing the bolt to the steel door and, with Zach and Jake by his side, the three wolves stepped forward as one and entered the room that had become his mother's prison.

The three wolves stepped closer to the huge man that had his fingernails piercing Jeanne's neck. Blood was running down her throat, splattering her soiled clothes. Clothes she'd probably worn since finding the little girl's mangled body in the woods the day of her kidnapping.

"I suggest you let her go and let her go now," Blake threatened.

There was no response from Blake's mother. She didn't notice her son standing in the room with her, the blood flowing from her body or her present danger. Never had he seen her so pale and unresponsive. He couldn't see any fang marks so she hadn't been bitten, but it looked like all the blood had been drained from her body.

There were needle marks on her arms, evidence that the Vampires had probably been sustaining themselves on her blood for the last month. She was in desperate need of a transfusion. Even he, a layman, knew that she didn't have long to live.

He was weeping inside, desperate, but also resigned. He had

done everything possible to find her. Maybe luck would still be on their side. Cerri and Keenan were with them. Perhaps they could help his mother and the other victim they'd found until they reached Sam's cabin in New York.

But first, they had to get rid of the panther. "Keenan is Tino with you?" Blake asked.

"Aye, he's right behind you."

"Good." Keeping his body positioned facing the stranger who held his mother's life in his hands, Blake called Tino into the room. "Would you like to do the honors?" he asked. "Either way he dies here. He won't get past us," he assured him.

"It's my duty to dispense justice," Tino answered.

Blake stepped back only enough to let Tino pass. "We're here if you need us," he reminded the boy.

"I won't," Tino promised, chin raised.

With feline speed, agility and grace, Tino flew across the room, knocking the nearly comatose woman to the floor, before turning on his brother, Alonso.

Still in Human form, although his nails were now claws, Alonso was not quick enough to dodge Tino's blow, for he possessed a righteous man's indignation and nothing would stop him from ridding the world of this cancer.

Before Alonso could swipe at Tino with his outstretched claw, Tino did a back flip, landing behind his brother. Taking a page out of Keenan's book, he snapped his brother's neck, paralyzing him from the waist down.

His brother's eyes were pleading with him, but Tino knew it was false. His brother felt no real emotion, only greed and the need to feed off terror. He was already dead inside. "Hand me a stake," he said, turning.

Tino felt Jake tap his shoulder and Jake held out his hand.

"I'd be honored if you'd use my father's dagger," Jake said to

Tino. He would be proud of you right now. As proud as we all are.”

Tino nodded, moved beyond words and reached for the dagger. “Goodbye, Alonzo,” He whispered, then bent down and drove the dagger through his brother’s heart, staring into his eyes until they glazed over in death.

Very gently Blake moved in, reached down and gathered his mother into his arms. She was so very weak, she couldn’t even hold her head up. How could she survive?

\* \* \* \*

Cerri shoved her way past the wolves blocking the cell door. “Let me see her,” she demanded. “Damn it, move out of the way, Keenan.”

Keenan was shocked that the woman was still alive. She must have held on by sheer will alone.

Cerri raced to Blake who cradled his mother in his arms, her head laying against his aching heart, “Oh man. I’ll do what I can, but she still might not make it,” she whispered. “She’s in bad shape.” Cerri pulled herself together, getting back into healer mode. “Carry her to the bed out there,” she ordered Blake. She followed him as he complied.

Very gently Cerri laid her palms over Jeanne’s heart, it sputtered, laboring, in desperate need of blood. “I have emergency supplies on the plane. You’re going to have to supply her with a lot of blood, and even then she might not live,” she said, her eyes filled with sadness, her voice heavy with concern.

Zach looked around the bedroom filled with corpses, from Vampires and Were-bears to one lone Were-cat. “Remove all your knives from the bodies. We leave no evidence that we were here.” Zach turned to Keenan, “Your men have the accelerant

outside with them?"

"Aye, we didn't forget to bring it," Keenan dutifully answered.

Zach nodded. "Have them pour it over the bodies first, then the rest of the house. We don't take off until the last man comes back and says that the house and all its occupants are nothing but ashes."

Keenan turned to Leo. "Send the men in from outside." Within five minutes, the room filled with Were-bears gathering bodies. Only one of their people didn't make it, Peter, one of Nick's warriors.

"You heard the man, get this place torched," urged Nick, saddened at the loss of one of his own. "Peter's body goes with us. He won't be left to burn with these creatures. We'll take care of him under the open stars. It's the way he would have wanted to be sent to join the heavens," he added.

With his mother in his arms, Blake led the makeshift battalion out of the house and into the night air. When they reached the plane, the other injured male victim already waited for them, propped up in a leather recliner, still unconscious. Hopefully, most of his wounds weren't too serious. But it was obvious he would need blood, too, to accelerate his own natural healing abilities.

"We'll all donate blood if we have to," Jake said from behind Blake. Zach nodded.

"Who agreed to stay behind at the house?" Blake asked, even though his mind was on his mother's deteriorating condition.

"Keenan, Nick and a few of Nick's men volunteered. They wanted to do a thorough job of it and saying goodbye to one of their own. I think they were planning on doing a quick search of the place to see if there was any indication of who was leading this thing and where Roland could be keeping himself."

Just then Cerri moved up behind Blake. "Lay her in one of the

recliners,” she instructed him. In her hands was a medical kit filled with drugs, but nothing that she could use to do a transfusion.

Turning toward Blake, Cerri admitted their lack of medical supplies. “Keenan’s plane just isn’t filled with the supplies needed to do the procedure safely. She definitely needs a more experienced doctor, one with better medical equipment.”

Blake lowered his head, unwilling to let others see the tears pooling in his eyes. When he pulled himself together, he lifted his head and said, “Do what you can.”

“I can make sure she isn’t in pain anymore by giving her a sedative. Basically, I’ll be inducing her into a coma. But it’s the only thing that we can do until we land in New York. Her injuries are too severe and her blood loss is making it impossible to tap into her own healing abilities like I’d normally do.”

Blake nodded. “If that’s what you have to do, then do it.” Blake took the empty reclining seat beside his mother and held her delicate hand in his. He needed Alyssa right now. He needed to feel her arms wrapped around him, her lips pressed against his and feel her heart beat beneath his palm.

He was so afraid he’d lose his mom before they made it to Sam’s home. If he lost his mother, then perhaps it was God’s will, but he couldn’t lose both of the women in his life. Without Alyssa he didn’t have a life. Somehow he’d convince her that she was the most important person in the world to him, that he believed she was his equal. He would convince her that he’d never hold anything back or lie to her again, even if it took him his whole life.

She was a grown woman, she had the right to make her own decisions. He should have trusted that she never would have volunteered to go on this mission while carrying their children. But somehow, in all the planning he forgot those facts, until she



rightly pointed them out.

Now he had to win her back. But win her back he would. Unable to do anything about Alyssa until they'd landed, Blake held his mother's tissue-paper frail hand, and allowed his eyes to close.

He never heard the rest of the men return to the plane or the engines rev up for takeoff. By the time they were in the air, he was in a deep and restful sleep, compliments of Cerri and her healing hands, hands that for just a brief moment had gently rested on the top of Blake's head.

\* \* \* \*

Alyssa was still fuming when her plane landed at a private airstrip Elizabeth and Sam had decided was a necessity. In fact, she was so pissed off she completely ignored Sam as his guards carried the book off the plane, a job that had supposedly been hers. Well, at this point her philosophy was that all men were underhanded assholes.

\* \* \* \*

Elizabeth noticed right away that something had happened to Alyssa. There was no perkiness in her eyes, no sign of the woman ready to take on the world to help Blake. There was nothing but a deep sadness so overwhelming it had pain clutching Elizabeth's heart. This woman was in torment. Not physically, but emotionally. And if Elizabeth had to guess, she'd say that Alyssa was ready to make a run for it.

But no matter how much she'd come to like Alyssa in the short time they've known each other, she wasn't about to let the best thing that had come into her cousin Blake's life just walk

away, not without a chance to figure out how to fix things back to the way they were before.

Taking the initiative, Beth stepped forward and wrapped Alyssa in a hug. "How are the babes?" they both asked at once. "Mine are coming along just fine, just a few more weeks? And yours?" Beth asked.

"I think they're fine, but I want Jack to check them out, I've been under a lot of stress the last twenty-four hours and I need to make sure I haven't hurt the babies. But on a positive note, I get to go shopping real soon for maternity clothes because these are already too tight and a house for the babies and me."

Elizabeth noticed right away that she didn't include Blake in that equation. Things were really bad if she'd already cut him out of her future plans.

Alyssa was in Jack's exam room when Beth finally found her husband. Without preamble, she started in on him, "What in the hell happened to Alyssa? That is not the same woman we met over a week ago." When he hadn't said anything in the three seconds she allotted him, Beth began tapping her foot, jiggling the babies she carried in the process. "Well?" she demanded.

"It appears, Blake didn't let Alyssa in on the plans for how all this is going down. He basically lied to her, telling her that all the warriors were needed for the battles to come and that she was the only one we trusted to get the book back to us. Then she found out there were three guards waiting for her on the plane, which of course, took possession of it the second it came into view, per our orders. She feels like she's not needed in any capacity."

"Well. Sam. My guess is she'd already be gone if Jack hadn't stalled her exam until after she rested, then stretched out the checkup, telling her she needed to take it easy in bed for at least the next twelve hours. Blake should be here by then so maybe he

can do something to calm her down and soothe her broken heart. And you better tell him he better not try to seduce her out of her mad or she'll be even more pissed when she begins to think again." That said, Elizabeth turned on her heels and stomped out of the room.

\* \* \* \*

Sam turned toward the desk, looking at the speakerphone that was presently turned on. He'd been in mid-conversation with Blake and the others when Elizabeth had stomped in. "I agree with the last instruction, don't pressure her to mate with you until all of your issues are resolved. Now, back to business, we've got the book hidden in the house, but with the fifteen or so we have guarding it we need to be very careful. Anything else you all wanted to add?" When no one answered, Sam continued. "The exchange is supposed to take place at midnight, has anyone had any word as to where we're all to meet?"

Playing along for the bug still planted in Sam's phone, Blake said, "Well we're heading to you. They know you lead our people, they'll probably contact you. We better hang up so that you can wait for their call."

Sam hung up, satisfied with the way things were playing out. Whoever wanted that book now knew where to come and get it. And he or she was also under the mistaken belief that a limited number of men were guarding it.

Only a few that Sam trusted with his life knew that the second Sam got the book, the ten men behind him, took it into their possession, glanced over at the plane that was already refueling and headed up the ramp.

The plane had been on the ground thirty minutes and they were airborne again, this time with ten men and women guarding

it. They were to travel through the night, landing only to refuel before moving on to a new destination, never staying in any one place until Sam gave the all clear that they could return with the Druid's *Books of Spells*.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as Keenan's plane touched the runway, Jeanne and the other injured man were loaded into a van that was loaded with two gurneys and medical equipment, everything from defibrillators to IV paraphernalia.

After a brief consultation and a blood donation, Blake handed his mother over to Jack, then climbed the stairs to Alyssa's room.

She was packed, fully dressed and sitting on the edge of the bed, patiently waiting for her twelve hours of bed rest to be over so she could get the hell out of here. She was hoping to be gone before Blake had shown up. "Shouldn't you be downstairs with your mother right now?" she asked.

"She's in good hands."

"Well, then. I'm glad you found her. It's time for me to go." She then calmly picked up her bag and headed toward the bedroom door.

Blake stood firmly in front of it, not about to let her walk out that door. She expected him to just let her walk out of his life? It wasn't happening.

"What are you doing?" she screeched. "Let me out of here."

"No. Not until we have a chance to talk, not until I can apologize for treating you as someone beneath me. For a while, I didn't think of you as an equal, but as a woman in a delicate condition who shouldn't be under any stress. That's my only excuse," he told her, his hands held out in front of him in supplication, in prayer. He was begging for her forgiveness and

he didn't know if it would be enough.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

“You did more than treat me like the helpless *little woman*, you didn’t trust me with the plan.” She snarled, poking him in the chest with her index finger to drive her point home. “I imagine there are still things you haven’t told me. It’s not fair to me, to us. I’m supposed to be your mate, but you deliberately lied just to get me out of the way and to a safe place. Like this will be any safer in a few hours.”

Blake sighed. “You’re right, I lied to you, but I’ve also learned from my mistakes, Alyssa. It will never happen again.”

“How can I trust you?” She looked up at him, tears glistening in her eyes. “How can I ever trust you again?”

Blake closed his eyes. “Trust that I love you, with everything inside me. I love you. And I know you love me. We can work on things from there.”

Alyssa sighed, knowing she was going to cave, not because of his appeal, or at least not *just* because of that. But the honest truth was that she couldn’t live without him. She loved him too damn much. With resignation and hope that she had read his sincerity right, she reestablished their mental link.

All of the love he felt for her rushed through their bond in an intoxicating flow, all of his worry that she’d leave him, his terror that they may have arrived too late to save his mother and the

anxiousness of what would be a violent battle of Protector's fighting Destroyers still to come. *At least the book is safe, for now.*

Knowing he needed comfort more than anything else, Alyssa held her arms open and Blake gratefully stepped into them, humbled at her generosity. *Yes it is. So where will I be while you are all fighting this out tonight? I'm assuming Beth and Jeanne will be joining me.*

"Beau, too," he answered.

"Beau Desjardin? You found him?" To say she was surprised would be a gross understatement.

"At least that's who I'm assuming he is. He's unconscious and hasn't told us who he is. He was being held in the same place we located my mother."

"How is he? How is she, really?"

\* \* \* \*

Blake let the tears he'd been holding back finally fall. It was okay to show his feelings in front of Alyssa, it was right that she know. "Beau will heal eventually. My mother may not make it through the day. They took so much blood from her. She's so weak. I—I think she's about to give up."

"Tell her about her grandchildren. Give her something to look forward to. It's all you can do besides donate blood, pray and wait and see. C'mon, let's go downstairs and you can introduce me to her."

\* \* \* \*

It was late afternoon when Sam and Blake walked over to their mates and started shepherding them out the front door.

"Where are we going?" Elizabeth asked.

"A safe place," was all that either of them would say.

They went through the woods surrounding Elizabeth's home, past the grotto that she spent so much time in and yet still they walked. For close to an hour, they hiked through the woods sometimes going in circles, before finally coming to a cave Elizabeth didn't recognize.

"Has this always been here?" she asked Sam.

"No, I had this area dug in. The entrance looks like a natural cave from the outside, but go through the first two chambers and you'll reach an underground bunker. You, Jeanne, Alyssa, Beau and Jack will be staying here with about five guards in the outer chambers."

"Try not to use telepathic communication so that it doesn't trace back to here," reminded Blake. "But these titanium doors will keep everyone out, it only opens from the inside so unless you know that it's us, don't come out for any reason, not even if the guards outside the door go down."

Both women rolled their eyes at the men, it was obvious they were in full protection mode and how could they not love that about them?

As Blake knocked a specific rap on the door, it eased open. Jack and both his patients were already in there waiting on the two women.

\* \* \* \*

After saying goodbye to their mates and leaving the five men to guard them, Blake and Sam hiked back to the house. It wouldn't be long now, dusk would be upon them soon then all hell would break loose. By now, the enemy knew that the hostages were free and that they'd lost many of their allies in the rescue operation.



Hopefully the head of the organization would show up, but Sam doubted it. Roland would show. He wanted the power. He craved it. Power was his drug of choice. Keenan would have his chance to rid himself of the traitor while all the other Were-bears and Were-wolves fought alongside each other to defeat their mutual enemies.

Instead of the fifteen guards their enemy expected, Sam ordered twice that number stationed around the perimeter of the house.

Everyone was tense, just waiting for the action to start. They'd set the scene perfectly, unless of course they sensed the trap and came with more men than expected. Anything was possible. Nick had only half of his men here as Dare needed them to help guard the prisoners still in the cells at Dare's plantation house.

After consideration, Sam felt he should have had more men flown in, but what was done was done. There was no time left.

The air was already different. Evil had a smell. It was suffocating, foul and stank like decaying flesh. The attack was about to begin.

Immediately, Keenan began using his magick to locate his brother. After talking about it, they all figured he would be the last one to show. Once all the danger had passed, he would walk in and expect to work the spell over everyone's dead bodies. Won't he be surprised that the book was nowhere near here? It was likely on its way to Ireland by now, and in a few hours it would be off to another location.

All of the warriors, Were-bear and *Loup-garou* alike, could smell the danger approaching. The question on everyone's mind was, *how much trouble was actually coming? And could they handle it?*

Everything around them stilled and the foul odor sucked all of the breathable oxygen from the air. The men were gasping,

having never experienced such a powerful sense of evil. Only an army of the undead could cause this much damage.

At the top of his voice, Sam yelled, "Shift. Now."

Where they were hidden, every man and woman stripped off their clothes and began the change. They'd need to face this force in their animal forms if they stood any chance in hell of defeating it.

The attack came quicker than anyone expected and it came from every direction, including the air. Vampires and Were-bears swarmed the field surrounding the house and Were-cats leaped from the branches of the trees ringing the meadow.

Sam's people were surrounded. The enemies' numbers at least doubled their own. He looked around in disgust, his only consolation that at least the women were locked up somewhere safe. How could they have underestimated the attacking army this way after all that they'd found out about them so far? It was a foolish mistake that could well cost every shifter and Human on Earth their life.

\* \* \* \*

Inside the bunker, Alyssa and Elizabeth alternated between pacing the small room and taking care of the patients. Beau looked much better, having had a blood transfusion an hour before they moved him to this hidden chamber. Jeanne still looked pretty bad.

She was less pale and now that she'd been thoroughly bathed Alyssa could tell she'd been a beautiful woman. She'd be beautiful again, too, once she regained her health. Right now, her cheekbones protruded, her lips were thin and cracked, and her red hair hung lank, and dull. According to Jack, she'd been raped repeatedly while she'd been imprisoned, and starved, as

well, to ensure she wouldn't have the strength to fight back.

The amount of suffering she endured, and still remained silent to her son so that she wouldn't lead him into a trap, was more heroic an act than Alyssa ever thought possible. She already loved this woman as if she were her natural mother. And she'd make sure she never suffered again.

In fact, she was going to suggest to Blake that they have his mother come live with them permanently, to grandmother their children, and to heal her body and soul.

\* \* \* \*

At once the attacking Were-bears and Vampires stopped their forward movement. It was as if they were as surprised to see the Were-cats as Sam and all the rest of the warriors were. As far as everyone knew it was only Tino's family that had been the catalyst for the attacking Were-cats. Was the conspiracy amongst the big cats larger than they knew?

As suddenly as the enemy had stopped, they rushed forward again in a flurry of motion. Sam was caught between two Vampires and trying to dodge them both, help was too far away and a panther now stalked him as well. He was in deep shit.

One of the Vampires managed to slice open Sam's thigh as he tried to pivot out of the way. Before he could retaliate, the panther jumped in the middle of the fray.

Instead of coming after the now injured wolf though, the panther leaped upon the other Vampire's back and sank its fangs deep into the evil creature's jugular. The Vampire was dead before he hit the ground, leaving Sam the opening he needed to go one on one with the remaining Vampire that had scored his thigh. It hurt like a bitch, but he wanted payback and he wanted it now. The panther and the wolf's eyes met. Then, Sam went for

the same killing maneuver the panther had used.

Sam limped a little, ready to move on to the next attacker, but everywhere he looked panthers fought the Vampires, Were-bears fought off Were-bears and the wolves were pitching in wherever they were needed, whether it be by distracting the enemy or with outright attacks.

Soon the battle began to wind down and Keenan could once again focus on his brother. With the help of the Were-cats that had appeared out of nowhere, he was now free to hunt his brother down and destroy him. And it was past time.

Sam nodded at Keenan. "Go ahead. We've got your back."

\* \* \* \*

Using their telepathic bond, Keenan tracked his brother to the house. Roland was busy tearing the rooms apart, desperately searching for the Druid's Book.

Keenan knew Roland realized the moment he stepped into the room because all movement ceased. "So it's up to me to kill you, Keenan. I was kind of hoping it would come out this way."

"You have no hope in hell of defeating me and there is no one left to come to your aid," Keenan replied nonchalantly as his brother slowly turned to face him, "Unless Emmanuel is hanging nearby?"

"No, he isn't anywhere near here. You think the puppet master wants to get his hands dirty? He'll come after Blake when he least expects it. Him and Alyssa." Roland sneered.

"I'm sure Blake will have no problem defeating him. Blake is a strong man and determined to right the wrongs his father has caused over the last four decades. So are you ready to die, Roland? You've stalled long enough, don't you think?"

"Where's the damn book, Keenan? Where is it? It should have

been here somewhere.”

“That’s what you’d think, wouldn’t you. Well it isn’t anywhere near here right now, nor will it be in the future.”

Keenan had found out all he could from Roland, it was time to finish him off, to send him to hell where he belonged. Raising his arms above his head, Keenan began to chant in an ancient language that even Roland was barely able to understand. A steady orange light began to build between Keenan’s hands until a glowing ball of flame hung suspended in midair. At once he flung the fireball forward and it punched a hole through Roland’s chest, incinerating his heart on the way through. Roland crumbled where he stood, still unaware of just how powerful Keenan could be.

Keenan turned to leave the room and walked straight into Cerri, who held her arms out to him, a comfort he hadn’t expected this early in their relationship. Hell, they hadn’t even managed one date yet.

\* \* \* \*

After combing the woods for hidden enemies and changing back into their clothed Human forms, everyone gathered around Sam’s porch. Sam was looking for the panther that had come to his aid. He’d remember his scent always. Once his eyes met the stranger’s, Sam motioned him up to the porch. “I wanted to thank you for coming to my aid, but if I can ask, who in the hell are you and how did you know we were going to need your help?”

“The truth?” the man asked

Sam nodded, Blake, Keenan, Zach and Jake flanking him.

“Tino contacted me. My name is Rafe Castillo and I’m the leader of our species, the Were-cats. Tino thought you guys might

be in over your heads, that you weren't prepared for the number of Vampires that could attack you here."

"Where is Tino anyway? I haven't seen him since this morning," asked Zach. "How could we have missed him?"

"You missed him because he snuck out to meet my plane, giving us directions to this place early enough that we could be up in the trees before your men even landed their plane this afternoon. We kept him on my plane so he'd be out of danger. What he did was foolhardy, but brave. Anyone could have caught him if he'd been seen."

"Tino tends to fade into the background. I'm hoping that will change now that his tormenters are all dead." Keenan added.

"He has no family?" asked Rafe.

"No, we want to find him family that will raise him properly. Show him what it means to live a productive and honorable life. He's already well on his way, but he'll need guidance," supplied Blake.

\* \* \* \*

Rafe thought about it for a minute, then thinking about the boy's bravery and initiative, made his decision. "He can stay with me until he's strong enough to survive on his own. I'll adopt him into my own family. Will that satisfy you all?" Rafe asked.

They all looked at each other for agreement and then nodded their permission. "Good, now that that is settled, we need to talk about a new treaty. These are modern times and we are more easily found by the evil ones."

"Too true," Sam agreed.

Later that day, after a bonfire that consumed the bodies of their enemies and a few of their own, Sam, Keenan and Rafe sat

down and ironed out a new peace treaty.

"The first thing that needs to happen is that the Were-bears need one overall leader. Right now you all run independently, with no checks and balances. You need to elect one, but for now Keenan, I propose you will hold that position," said Sam.

When Keenan looked taken aback, he glanced over at Rafe. He saw only agreement on the cat's face.

"You'll also need to set up a council of elders from amongst the various clans," added Rafe.

"I have a suggestion then," Keenan said. "One of each of our kind should be present on each council to report back to their respective leaders. So no one is ever out of the loop again. What one group of people knows about our enemies and their movements, we all know. That way we can always watch each other's backs."

"Good idea," both men agreed.

"Anything else we need to include in the treaty?" asked Keenan.

Sam glanced at Rafe, then nodded. He'd let Rafe take the lead on this one.

"Yeah, there is one thing. I noticed that you killed your brother in a most unusual way. I take it you're as equally Druid as you are Were-bear." It was a statement, not a question and they all knew it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Keenan nodded, there was no reason to hide it anymore. It was the one advantage he had over Roland and he'd kept the knowledge to himself since he'd realized it as a boy.

"Then the *Book of Spells* should be back in your hands. You'll know the proper way to use it if it ever becomes

necessary.”

Keenan swallowed, perfectly aware of the amount of trust these two men were placing in him. “Thank you,” he said, humbled.

“Now, how about we go find Blake and release our mates and the sick from the underground bunker. The women are probably going nuts by now.”

\* \* \* \*

Blake had already beaten Sam to it, having raced to release Alyssa the moment the last body had been burned down to ash. The small group were being escorted back by Blake and the five guards, carrying the gurneys of the injured, when Sam, Keenan and Rafe stepped out of the house.

Alyssa walked up to Sam and apologized for her rude behavior that morning, then told him that she and Blake were headed back to New Jersey right away. “We have a piece of land to buy and a house to build. And I want it all done in a month’s time,” Alyssa declared, looking straight at Blake as she said it.

“I guess I’ll move mountains if she asks for it. People can build a house in a week. A month is no sweat.” But already his heart was racing. He would manage it, even if he had to pay a company to work twenty-four hours a day to get it finished.

Later that evening, Sam received a call from Sebastian. “I’ve just landed in Spain and am on my way to Saragossa now. That’s where your sister was sent as a child. I’ll track her from there,” he promised.

\* \* \* \*

A month later, Blake and Alyssa were seated in their new



Adirondack chairs on their new back porch. The house had been completed only two days ago and was still only partially furnished. But there was time for that.

The mosquitoes were having a heyday outside the screened in porch. "I told you it would be better to screen this room in otherwise we'd be mosquito chow," she laughed. She did that a lot these days. She was glowing, her pregnancy obvious now that the triplets were growing so fast and their relationship was strengthening every day.

\* \* \* \*

The first sign that Emmanuel had finally arrived was the disappearance of not only the flying pests, but also the squirrels that had been happily lying on a branch in the nearest tree. Alyssa quickly went inside and down to the secret chamber they had installed and locked herself in while Blake waited for his father to appear. It was almost anticlimactic in the end. Blake was already in his wolf form as the Vampire casually walked out of the trees.

Blake lunged for his throat, tearing it out in less than a second. Emmanuel crumpled to the ground, shock clearly written on his face as his blood seeped into the ground and his eyes glazed over in death. What had his father expected, that Blake would want to talk to him before he killed him? Or maybe he had wanted to gloat over all the destruction he'd caused. Well, too bad. Blake wasn't about to take any chances that he would have escaped yet again.

Calling to Alyssa through his mental bond, Blake assured her that it was safe to come out. Blake carried his father's decaying corpse to the bonfire pit that they'd built just for this purpose and quickly doused the Vampire with accelerant. Alyssa handed

Blake the match to light the fire and the pair watched the flames eat away at the remains until nothing but smoldering ash and smoke remained.

Finally the heavy weight of anxiety was lifted from their shoulders and they could stop looking over their shoulders for Blake's father to appear. They could finally get on with their lives. In fact Blake's mother was due to arrive in just a couple of days. Her suite was already decorated. The only thing missing was the woman herself. Blake took Alyssa's hand and led her into their home where the stench of death couldn't reach them and love's enchantment would forever surround and nourish their family.

## Epilogue

*The next evening...*

Alyssa flipped the closed sign on her shop door, having worked like a dog all day on Keenan and Cerri's wedding set that Keenan had commissioned as a surprise when she felt the first disturbance in the air. The foul stench was familiar to her, but she couldn't place it.

An eerily familiar face peered at her through the closed glass door. Alyssa had just taken a step back when he smashed his way through it. Now she knew who this was, it was the Vampire that had killed her mother and father fifteen years earlier. He wore an evil smirk on his decaying face. It must have been some time since he'd fed.

Having heard the commotion and gotten an update from Alyssa, Blake eased himself through the panel in her office and stood just outside the showroom door, ready to step in the second it was safe to do so.

"You've been gone for some time. I was beginning to wonder if I'd have to search for you again."

And then it clicked in her mind. "You're the one who's been harassing me?" she screeched affronted.

He nodded and glided closer.

Having learned over the last few weeks to never go unarmed, Alyssa eased her arm behind her as she backed up against a display case and reached for the dagger she had strapped to the belt she wore beneath her maternity top.

After easing the knife from its sheath, Alyssa allowed the Vampire to get closer, before lunging and stabbing him directly in the jugular as Blake had taught her when he'd presented her with the jeweled dagger. The Vampire was dead before Blake even made it across the room.

The next morning they got a phone call from an exuberant Sam. "We had the babies last night, two boys," he said.

"What did you name them?" Alyssa asked.

"William Blake Woods and Matthew Winters Woods. They have a nice ring to them, don't they? By the way, Jack will arrive in six weeks, once the babies and their mama get the all clear."

\* \* \* \*

*Thirteen weeks later...*

Alyssa was exhausted. Delivering triplets was not an easy job and Blake was no help. In fact, he spent most of the time horizontal, feeling her pain as if it were his own. He had to be sedated because he was making her a nervous wreck.

Now he stood over three bassinets, tracing the names he'd placed on them, not that he wouldn't know each of them by scent alone. But to actually touch them, to trace their names, it made it all the more real.

Astra Marie, Allie Elizabeth and Danaan Nicholas Donovan. His legacy. Moving quietly, Blake stepped to Alyssa's side, sitting down next to her on their bed and gently kissing her lips. "You

did good, baby. I love you.”

Blake had just picked up his cell phone to call Sam with the news when it began to ring. It was Sebastian and his voice was terse.

“Is the Doc still with you?” he asked.

“Yes. He’ll be here six more weeks. Why?” Blake answered.

“I’m on my way home. Have the doctor waiting,” and then Sebastian hung up.

Did he have Samantha with him or was he the one in need of aid? Dutifully, Blake went to hunt down Jack and told him to expect another patient. Jack smiled, knowing his wait for a mate was almost at an end.

## *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.

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