

MARIE HARTE

IN PLAIN  
SIGHT

SADDHAIN publishing, Ltd.

*In a choice between fight or flight, love makes the final decision.*

*A Cougar Falls story.*

Cullen Whitefeather is Ac-taw –a fierce golden eagle shapeshifter. The ultimate predator, he doesn't shy away from confrontation...unless it involves one tempting, smart-mouthed woman. The woman destined to be his mate. The woman who doesn't even know he's alive.

Sarah Duncan made one mistake years ago and hasn't stopped paying for it since. Tired of the town's treatment, she finally tells the truth about what really happened and pays a hard price. Her clan wants to silence her. Permanently.

Rescue comes from a completely unexpected source—Cullen, a man who can barely seem to string two sentences together. Yet his fierce protectiveness, compassion, and bewitching touch are worth more than a thousand words.

With Sarah so close, Cullen is losing his mind—and his heart. She says she wants to leave, and the raptors want her gone. But if there's one thing Cullen's good at, it's a fight. And he's not letting her go without one.

Warning: this book contains explicit sex, a woman done wrong, birds of prey, sexy men who can't talk to women, and red hot lovin' that'll make you wish you could fly.

**eBooks are *not* transferable.  
They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.**

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.  
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520  
Macon GA 31201

In Plain Sight  
Copyright © 2009 by Marie Harte  
ISBN: 978-1-60504-579-5  
Edited by Laurie Rauch  
Cover by Tuesday Dube

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: June 2009  
[www.samhainpublishing.com](http://www.samhainpublishing.com)

# In Plain Sight

*Marie Harte*

# Chapter One

*Cougar Falls, Montana*

Cullen Whitefeather swore as the snow descended. He loved a white Christmas as much as the next guy, but he wasn't too keen on traveling through the white crap. And considering it was mid-March, he figured he'd had enough snow to last him through another winter wonderland.

Nights of no sleep compounded with his dislike of the slick ice forming on the ground even now. His stomach grumbled and, blinded by the glaring sun, he almost missed an open spot. Parking, he quickly left his truck, darted into a very crowded diner, and stomped his boots free of the snow.

He glanced around the Fox's Henhouse, looking for a place to sit. The Chastells sat in one corner. *Damn cats always took the best defensive positions.* He wasn't surprised to see members of the bear clan in another corner. And there, in the middle, sat several of his new clan, now that the eagle clan had disbanded. The raptors. At a nod from Mike Shaw, he joined the group, wishing he'd arrived earlier.

He didn't particularly like Mike and his friends. Though the new clan included all the diurnal birds of prey, he missed the eagles, being a golden eagle himself. By and large, raptors tended to hang out in groups, and Cullen lived a solitary existence. The damned clan could get cloying at times, barely giving a body breathing room. There was always some drama or another stirring the need to shed blood and compete to mate. As if Cullen could ever preen for a female's attentions. He could barely string two sentences together whenever *she* was around.

Distracted by the aroma of cinnamon and vanilla drawing close, Cullen inhaled and focused on getting a piece of that heaven. To his right, a lucky pair of silver foxes dug into their breakfast, and he could only stare with envy. Mac made the best waffles in Montana, and Cullen lived for Sarah's coffee.

*Sarah Duncan.* He spent way too much time thinking about the captivating woman, and he couldn't explain why. They were both Ac-taw, but then most of the folks in Cougar Falls were shapeshifters. Those who weren't had shapeshifter blood somewhere in their family tree.

"Cullen." Sarah stood next to him with a pot of coffee in hand. She wore her dark brown hair in a ponytail, exposing the creamy expanse of her neck and the soft planes of her face. When the light hit her just right, thin strands of gold and red shimmered in that sable hair. All in all, a mouthwatering package topped with a generous smile. "What can I get you?"

As usual, his tongue tied in knots, and he had to force himself to take a moment, playing it cool. Otherwise, he'd fawn like a fool.

“More like what *can't* he get from you,” Mike Shaw said with a snicker.

“Excuse me?” Sarah paused with the pot just over Cullen’s cup.

*So close, and yet so far from breakfast.* Cullen nudged the carafe with his mug. To his relief, she poured him a full cup of steaming-hot brew. She brushed against his arm, and his body tingled from the contact.

“Waffles, please,” he said in a rumble.

Sarah nodded and turned, but not before Mike added in a loud voice, “Jenny’s not too happy with you right now. Best you steer clear of clan central for a while.”

She turned back around. “What the hell are you talking about?” There was no love lost between Sarah and Mike, not since she’d rejected him at the last festival dance in front of everyone. Though Cullen didn’t participate in social events, even he’d heard about Mike’s crash and burn.

“Please.” Mike scoffed. “Everyone knows about you hitting on Dennis. ’Course, from what I remember, you favor married men, isn’t that right?”

Cullen couldn’t tear his gaze from Sarah’s face. He wanted to pound Mike into the floor, but the shame that darkened Sarah’s cheeks stopped him. What the hell was Mike talking about?

“Yessiree,” Rob Jenkins added from the other side of the table and turned to Mike. “Wasn’t it your brother who was taken advantage of by that same pretty face not so long ago?”

Sarah opened her mouth to speak then seemed to notice how quiet the diner had become. “Will was a mistake. You know better than anyone about mistakes,” she said to Mike in a low voice. “But I don’t know what you’re talking about with Dennis. I haven’t even seen him in weeks.”

“Not what he says,” Rob answered.

“No matter how many times he tries to say no, you just won’t let him go, will you? Hard for a man to reject those pretty thighs,” Mike murmured and nodded to her slim legs encased in jeans. “Especially what’s in between them.”

Cullen’s heart beat too fast. Rage settled over him like a smothering blanket, and he had to work to control himself. Sarah and Dennis Larsen? Larsen was not only one of the raptor clan leaders, but a married man to boot. Raptors considered marriage a sacred bond. They didn’t tolerate adulterers well at all.

Sarah leaned closer to Mike, a predatory gleam in her eyes. “You’ve been waiting for this, haven’t you? You push and you push because you think I won’t break. Well, guess what, Mike? You want to hash it out? I’ll be happy to explain to everyone just what the hell’s been going on.”

“You don’t want to say anything you might regret,” Mike hastily interrupted. “Admitting you were foolin’ around might get you banned from the clan.”

Banishment from the clan meant banishment from the town. Cullen wanted to shout at Sarah not to say anything, but his lips were frozen shut.

“You’re just pissed because you weren’t as clever as your brother. The only reason Will got lucky is because he lied. I had no idea he was married when he charmed me into bed with promises of happily-ever-after. Funny that happened three years ago, yet you keep bringing it up, don’t you? And Dennis?” She laughed, a grating sound both ugly and pained. “*He’s* the one who won’t take ‘no’ for an answer. Clan leader? More like clan loser. He’s hard up for sex since Jenny won’t give him any, not since she found him screwing around on her the *last* time. I wouldn’t touch him if my life depended on it.

“So you go ahead, Mike. You air out the clan’s dirty laundry. And while you’re at it, you can stop telling everyone I’m the town whore. I never earned that title. But your brother and Dennis sure the hell did.” Looking around her at the stunned patrons staring in shock, she put the coffeepot on their table, took the receipt book out of her back pocket, and threw it at Mike. “Go fuck yourself, ’cause no one else in Cougar Falls will.”

Sarah stormed away, disappearing behind the counter into the back.

No one spoke for a few moments.

Cullen didn’t know what to think. He didn’t keep up with town talk as a rule. But this news about Sarah and Will Shaw? How had he missed that? And to think Dennis Larsen had been pawing at her and she’d had to put up with it?

“She’s full of it,” Mike tried to bluff.

*This asshole spreading lies about Sarah is the end of enough.*

“Well, that was interesting,” Burke Chastell growled. “I can’t believe I ever listened to your bullshit. You know, Mike, from what Sarah said, it sure doesn’t seem like she sleeps around, not like your clan leaders. This just confirms what I’d already thought about Larsen.” Burke snorted, then murmured something to his wife and brothers, and the four of them stood. “We’re leaving. Mac,” he said to the man behind the counter. “Make sure Sarah gets her tip.”

The cats left, as did some of the bears, while everyone else remained in place. Whispers grew into excited chatter. Yet another juicy piece for the gossip mill, Cullen thought with disgust.

Having had his fill, he stood and pulled Mike to his feet.

“What the—”

Cullen slammed his fist into Mike’s face before the idiot could finish his sentence. Lightning fast, he dumped the scalding pot of coffee over the man’s crotch and then shoved Rob on his ass before he could land a punch.

“This is why I stay away from the clan. You guys are dicks.”

He left the yelling behind and followed the route Sarah had taken. Cullen tossed a few bills to Mac. “Sorry for the mess.”

Mac scowled at the crowd behind him. “Don’t mention it. Next meal’s on the house.” He raised his voice. “Raptors, out of the place. Now!”

Cullen didn't wait around to watch. He strode through the back door, only to see a golden eagle flying away in the distance.

Sarah wiped at the useless tears on her face and threw clothes haphazardly into a ragged suitcase.

"I cannot believe this backwater town. I made a mistake three years ago and I'm *still* paying for it. Of course Burke never wanted to go out with me. He probably thought I'd give him a disease." She hiccupped, wanting to die with embarrassment.

For years she'd had a crush on Burke Chastell, a catamount Shifter with killer good looks. He didn't seem to mind that she had no family but the clan she belonged to. Like her, his parents had passed away years ago. But unlike Sarah, he had two brothers to raise.

She respected his loyalty to family, and to making his ranch a priority. He didn't seem the type to listen to town gossip. But then, she didn't know Burke as well as she might have wished. It seemed anyone she was even remotely interested in took a giant step away from her. Now that she thought about it, Mike Shaw might have been the reason.

The ass. As if she'd ever sleep with him. He was no better than his damned brother.

She swore at thoughts of Will Shaw, but she couldn't help remembering the past, as much as she wished to forget it.

Will Shaw was one of the few Ac-taw who'd gone away to college. After he returned, he'd seemed so worldly, so unlike the high school football captain who'd left Cougar Falls the town hero. When he'd asked her out on several dates, she'd been in heaven. None of her peers appealed to her. The raptors she knew were bent on conquest and considered her a prize to be won. But Sarah wanted a real man, not a boy bent on adding her notch to his bedpost.

Though twenty-one at the time, she was a young twenty-one, innocent and naïve of the tricks men could play. Before long, she'd fallen in love with Will. After a few weeks, she'd gifted him with her virginity, and apparently, her reputation. Not three days after he'd professed to love her forever, he introduced the town to his *wife*, a shy Shifter from a respectable family, who he'd met and married while in college.

The jerk had knowingly seduced Sarah, and then bragged about it to his friends. She'd spent years trying to overcome that humdinger of a mistake. Ignoring the whispers and stares of those in her clan, she'd tried to focus on the present. But it seemed no one would let her. And really, why would they? Will Shaw was a favorite among his peers. Sarah was pretty and a hard worker, but she didn't have clan-leader blood in her veins.



Not like Dennis Larsen, another jerk who couldn't keep it in his pants. The sheer hell of it was that he knowingly broke his wedding vows time and time again. Yet she, a woman who'd been lied to, was cast as the town whore who'd sleep with anyone.

She felt foolish for crying, but the humiliation just wouldn't stop. Now everyone knew the truth, if they chose to believe her. If her situation weren't so pathetic, she'd laugh. Sex with Will hadn't been terrible, but it hadn't been pleasant. She'd lost her dignity, for what? A sweaty screw in the backseat of a Mustang?

*I'm leaving this town. There's nothing else for me here. No family, no clan.*

No clan.

The idea of facing life without the support of other Ac-taw was daunting, but Sarah had come to the end of her rope. If her friend Julia could live outside of Cougar Falls, so could she. Granted, Julia was having some problems at the moment, but she'd survived life outside the town—among humans—for over a year.

Despite her bad track record with men, deep down Sarah wanted a family. A mate to love and laugh with, children to raise with tender affection. Her children would never want for acceptance. *And just how the hell am I going to find a husband here, where everyone thinks I'm no better than a slut?*

She wiped her face again and packed enough to last a week. She'd spend a few days elsewhere, to sit and think about where to go and what to do. *All alone, like I've always been, while the Dennis Larsens and Will Shaws of the world bask in their own power and popularity.*

Laughing at her bad luck before she could cry again, Sarah headed out the door with her suitcase in hand just as Jenny Larsen and four of her cronies arrived.

"Once a slut, always a slut," Jenny said with a sneer. She towered over Sarah at an impressive six feet. A bald eagle when shifted, the woman was a threat on every level.

*Shit.*

Thinking fast, Sarah forced a grin. "You know, this town just keeps on giving." She threw her suitcase at the others and shoved Jenny as hard as she could. In a flash, she ran inside the house and locked her door.

She stripped down to nothing and raced to a back window. Shoving it open, she shifted into her animal soul and sped into the sky, aware of five birds of prey hard on her tail.

## Chapter Two

Cullen scoured the ground below him, awash in sensation as the cold air whipped over his feathered body. He screeched in response to a cry of greeting from a bald eagle passing by and asked after Sarah.

To his relief, the male had spotted her. The bird went on to mention a large skirmish just over the next rise, with very bad odds for the lone opponent.

Cullen tore through icy wind and flutters of snow. He saw everything. Rabbits, mice and deer seeking shelter. Ac-taw, in both animal and man form, roaming through the outskirts of town bordering Glacier National Park. Cullen made no effort to hide himself. Instead he cried out for Sarah, offering help if only she'd reach out and take it.

Minutes later, he found her dodging a harrier, two red-tailed hawks and two bald eagles. *Damn Jenny Larsen*. Furious that, once again, Sarah had to deal with more dickhead raptors, Cullen darted after the smaller predators.

*"This isn't much of a fair fight, and definitely against clan rules,"* he warned them.

They didn't veer from Sarah, and he gladly wracked his talons along the harrier's underbelly before nipping one of the hawks' wings. It didn't take much to put the other hawk out of commission. So much for Jenny's small posse.

The eagles were his biggest threat. While Sarah engaged Jenny, Cullen took care of Pat. The woman was as big a bitch as Jenny. An unpleasant bully who liked nothing better than to laud her riches over the clan, as if her husband had done more than inherit his wealth.

*"Stay out of this, Whitefeather."* Pat stared at him as if he was no better than the dirt beneath her sharp claws.

*"What did she do to you? Or is this a challenge?"*

*"Yes."* She leaped on the excuse, as he'd known she would.

*"Whose?"*

Pat squawked at him with a resounding curse to mind his own business.

*"Right. It's Jenny Larsen's challenge, so back out of it."*

Pat retaliated. Cullen neatly avoided the eagle's beak and slashed her back, taking care not to rip too hard. He wanted to scare her, not maim her. A warning to any and all who messed with him or Sarah. He didn't give two shits about raptor law, made by those who refused to follow it. Cullen couldn't wait to pay Dennis Larsen a visit. Clan leader or not, the man had clearly overstepped his position, first by hitting on

Sarah, and then by having his wife pull this stunt. And if Larsen was spitting in the face of raptor tradition by having multiple affairs, he should have been stripped of his leadership position long ago.

*"I won't forget this,"* Pat cried out as she spiraled away.

*"Good. Neither will I."* Cullen then shrieked at Jenny, who was entangled with Sarah. Jenny let go only after Sarah released her, but the woman had done some damage. The scent of Sarah's blood came to him on a gust of wind.

Enraged, Cullen forgot himself. He darted at Jenny and bit her neck, enough to draw serious blood. She screeched and veered away, trying to escape. He would have gone after her to finish the job, but Sarah warbled for help.

*"I'm not going to make it,"* she managed to whisper.

Cullen covered Sarah, allowing her to use his draft as they glided over the wind toward the ground. He did his best to nudge her gently, prepared to grab her should she suddenly fall from the sky. He couldn't stop her blood flow in his current form, and he'd seen enough to know she was really hurt.

This close to his property, he forced her to go just a bit farther. They successfully reached his land. As soon as they touched down, he shifted form. Sarah, however, didn't move. Swearing, he lifted the fragile bird in his arms and ran into the house. Her next shift would speed her healing, *if* she could shift.

Stemming the blood, he wrapped a loose bandage around her ribs and wadded cloth around her breast. Her eyes and face remained unscathed, but the wounds on her chest bothered him. Carrying her in front of the fireplace, he leaned close and whispered, "Come on, Sarah. Wake up."

She didn't move.

"Sarah, honey. It's me, Cullen." He cleared his throat, trying to project comfort and not worry. Stroking her head and wing, he said, "You need to wake up. The clan needs you." When she didn't move, he took a chance and added what he'd suspected for some time. "Your mate needs you, love. Come back to me, to Cullen." He leaned close and rubbed his cheek against her feathered one.

Her slight shudder relieved him. He pulled back, on the off-chance her animal spirit took charge and struck out at a perceived threat. Sarah blinked back at him, gradually transforming from bird to woman.

He'd never seen the shift done so slowly before, and he watched the sheer beauty of her being as Sarah's golden skin took the place of feathers. She blinked in confusion, but held out a hand, reaching for him.

He clasped it, pleased at how right her smaller palm felt in his.

"Thank you," she whispered before closing her eyes once more.

The bandages had sloughed off during her shift, so he found new ones. After applying salve and new dressings, Cullen clothed her in one of his long shirts and sat her in his overstuffed chair, facing the fireplace. Shivering as the cold penetrated, he started a fire and put on some warm, dry clothes.

He returned to Sarah and lifted her so that she sat on top of him in his lap. Stroking her hair as she slept, he felt true peace for the first time in his life. And, without meaning to, he fell asleep.

*“I’ve been waiting for you,” he murmured, watching the magical creature fly through the air toward him.*

*No snow dotted the skies. Instead, a warm breeze grazed his neck as his hair waved around his face. The sun warmed his skin, his flesh attuned to every sensation when not encumbered by clothing.*

*The golden eagle lowered, riding the currents as she cried out her welcome. The green grass smelled fresh, the scent of honeysuckle and roses coming from his mother’s garden sweetening the air.*

*Cullen stared at the female in her descent. She landed in front of him, fascinating him as she shifted from golden eagle to human and back again. A blur of face and form, she finally stopped, an amalgamation of human and raptor. Dark feathers ran down her back and along her wings, while her human body retained its perfect female form. Sarah looked like an angel made flesh.*

*Large, round breasts beckoned his touch. Her nipples hardened under his greedy fingers, and he pinched and teased until she squirmed and drew closer. She pushed him back, so that she lay on top of him over the soft grass. As she kissed his neck and chest, she parted her firm thighs, cradling his erection against that hot, wet channel begging for his touch. Giving in to his need, he arched closer, until she stopped him with a hand against his chest.*

*He started to apologize, knowing he wasn’t worthy of such beauty, when she began kissing her way down his body. He stroked her back, keenly aware of the animal spirit visible to his naked eye. Even though he knew it was a dream, that the Ac-taw never merged both animal and human in anything but spirit, he couldn’t help his response to her mouth.*

*Those ripe lips tugged their way past his belly toward his cock, licking and sucking until he was a hairsbreadth from coming down her throat.*

*When he moaned, he drew an answering response from her throat and pressed closer, stroking her feathers that felt as silky as her hair...*

Yawning, Sarah groaned and prodded the firmness under her cheek, curious as to what provided such warm comfort. A rumbled oath and sudden movement underneath her startled her into opening her eyes. Muscular arms prevented her from falling off a man’s lap.

“How do you feel?” Cullen Whitefeather asked, his voice deep and soothing while stoking an unfamiliar heat in her belly.

“F-fine.” Sarah tried to scoot off him and felt a telltale hardness prodding her backside. She glanced at his face, expecting more of the same poor treatment from the man who’d sat with Mike and Rob. Cullen had never said a bad thing to her, but they’d rarely exchanged more than a few words when he came to the diner, and those were about what he wanted off the menu.

“Sorry.” He flushed and stood with her in his arms. After setting her back down, he hurried away. “You thirsty?”

“Ah, sure.” She didn’t know what to think. Cullen had never been one to follow blindly, and thankfully, he didn’t seem to subscribe to Mike’s poor manners. He rarely made eye contact when they met, but considering he treated most everyone the same way, she’d chalked his avoidance up to his inherent air of solitude, not rejection.

And it was too bad, because now that she paid attention, she could see he was surprisingly good-looking. Tall and lean, with a body built for speed, Cullen might even rival Burke Chastell for sexiest Shifter in Cougar Falls, now that she took a good, hard look. There was a hardness, a dangerous ruthlessness to Cullen that Burke lacked.

Dark hair and coppery skin proclaimed Cullen’s Native American ancestry. He was born in Cougar Falls and worked with his immediate family in woodworking, that much she knew. His father had died last year, leaving him, his three brothers and his mother all alone. Though respected members of the raptor clan, the Whitefeathers stayed to themselves. She couldn’t recall the last time she’d seen any of them at the Totem Festival or a clan meeting.

Cullen returned with a cup of tea and a plate of cookies. Pleased at his thoughtfulness, she gave him a tentative smile. “I can’t thank you enough.” Memories of what he’d done to Jenny broadened her grin. “Especially for kicking Jenny Larsen’s ass.”

“Sorry I couldn’t do more.” He frowned. “I took Mike down, but it wasn’t near what he really deserved. He and the others are a bunch of pricks. He shouldn’t have said what he did in the diner.” He clenched his large fists by his sides and loomed over her, looking at her with an expression she couldn’t quite decipher, but one that made her feel surprisingly safe.

This was the longest conversation she and Cullen had ever shared. Sarah stared back at him in fascination. His low voice sent tingles through her belly.

He shocked her anew when he squatted down, reached out and cupped her cheek. She felt a spark where his hand touched her, an instant connection that woke her body from the sexual hibernation she’d been living in for so long. Cullen must have felt it as well, for his eyes narrowed. He slowly took his hand from her face, his thumb lingering on the pad of her lower lip.

Sarah wanted to kiss his fingers, to know his taste as well as his touch. The urge to nip and mark him as hers made no sense. Heat infused her body, and her raptor cried out for his with a yearning that shook her. Confused, she didn’t know what to think. She’d thought she’d loved Will, but she’d never felt this attuned to his animal spirit. The notion that Cullen, a man she barely knew, could affect her so intensely scared the hell out of her.

After that scene in the diner, a sexual encounter with any male in this town would probably get her tossed out of the clan on her ass. Sarah planned to leave, but she wanted to go on her terms. That way,

when she became a huge success at...something...she could come back and rub it in everyone's faces. But not if Cullen Whitefeather turned her into a puddle of need with those long, lingering looks and that sexy way he had of touching her. What stories would he spread about her to the clan when—if—they had sex?

As if sensing her unease, Cullen leaned back and motioned to her tea.

She took a sip, drinking in not just her tea, but every detail about him. Cullen wore a pair of worn jeans and a flannel shirt left unbuttoned at the top. She could see the strong chords of his throat as he swallowed. As he studied her in return, she noticed that his eyes lightened, going from an earthy brown to a golden yellow, as if his bird stared out at her from within that powerful body.

She swallowed hard, wondering what he saw when he looked at her. An easy conquest, a pathetic woman caught in unfortunate circumstances? Did he pity her? He said he'd punched Mike in the face. Of course, not many men liked Mike. But she'd seen him save her from Jenny and her friends.

"You left the diner awfully fast." As soon as he said it, he flushed.

His uneasiness seemed at odds with his large, physical presence. When silent, there seemed nothing that could discomfit Cullen, so this obvious awkwardness took her aback.

She sipped her tea because he'd gone through the trouble of making it. "Cullen, I really appreciate what you did for me." The tea warmed her, and she sighed, wanting to relax even though she knew she couldn't. "I should probably get going just as soon as I finish this tea."

"Hell, no."

She blinked at him.

"Sarah, you lost a lot of blood. You're still not fully healed. I can see the stiffness when you move. The snow's coming down thicker, and there's reports of a storm headed our way. Why not stay here and recuperate?"

*Here? With him?* Sarah didn't know what to say. She wanted to rest, to pretend someone cared about her. Yet what did she really know about Cullen Whitefeather? He'd saved her, yes. Great. But he was still a man, still a raptor. She didn't have the best track record with that combination.

"I won't hurt you." His voice was thick, though decidedly gentle. "Those asshole raptors don't know you're here. With any luck, Jenny will have bled out from her wounds."

"Ha. I wish," she said glumly, then sighed. "I don't really. It's not her fault she's such a bitch. Blame her mother and her dog of a husband."

Cullen grinned, and Sarah felt as if she'd been blindsided. How had she never *seen* him before? He was in the Fox's Henhouse nearly every day, if not for a meal, then for coffee.

"Come on, Sarah. It's still cold as a witch's ti—" He cleared his throat. "You don't want to be traveling alone through a storm, do you?"

*Hell.* She didn't want to be trapped in Cougar Falls, not after this disaster of a day. "I'm leaving town," she said loudly, reminding herself. "I was packed and ready to go when Jenny and her friends showed up at my house."

He didn't say anything, and she felt the need to explain further.

"I've spent the better part of my years trying to belong. It's finally clear to me that I don't fit in and never will."

He grunted.

"What does that mean?"

"The great raptor clan," he said with disgust. "A damned pack of pecking hens."

She'd often thought the same thing, but found it amusing to hear it from someone else. Comparing a raptor to a chicken was as bad as comparing a wolf to a dog, and by the sneer on his face, Cullen had no love for the clan. She wondered why his family hadn't left when the rest of the eagles had, taking their people north. If she'd had family, she would have moved in a heartbeat.

Cullen shook his head. "The clan needs to be shaken up. The leaders don't lead by example the way they used to. Why do you think my family and I don't hang with the others? We don't fit in either."

*At least you have a family.* Sarah had never known her father. And when she was just sixteen, her mother had passed away, leaving her with only the clan for support. Sarah suddenly felt very much alone.

"You should stay," he said bluntly. "My family went north to visit our Canadian cousins. The house is empty and business has been slow, thanks to this God-awful weather. I could really use the company."

This from the taciturn man who visited the Fox's Henhouse every day? Hell, she'd never imagined the man could converse in more than three-word sentences. *Coffee, black. Waffles with bacon.* Still, what were her options? A glance out the window showed he'd been telling the truth. She could barely see through the blanket of white pelting the windows.

"I'm not going back to the diner," she warned.

"Okay." He mesmerized her with his intensity. He hadn't blinked in forever, focusing on her in a way that made her entire body tremble.

"I'm not an easy lay, if that's why you want me to stay," she said stiffly, uncomfortably aware of his maleness.

His eyes flashed like gold coins, and his lips curled. "I heard you rip into Mike, and I saw what you did to those raptors in the sky. Nothing easy about you, Sarah."

His humor relaxed her. Far from threatening, Cullen soothed her bird's ruffled feathers. He didn't touch her, but she swore she could feel his comforting heat, even through the distance separating them. She wondered what he'd feel like skin to skin, if his chest was smooth or covered with dark, silky hair...

"I-I don't have anything to wear." Her lamest excuse yet, but she was losing her will to resist. Talk about the wrong time to find a man appealing. She was injured, on the outs with one of her clan leaders and

probably half the clan by now, and preparing to step into the great unknown outside of Cougar Falls. She had no time for attraction, and especially not with a man who threw her emotions so out of whack.

Even if he was the most beautiful golden eagle she'd ever seen.

*Mine.* She inwardly winced at her animal spirit's gleeful cry. Her eagle was already half in love with him, and Sarah had a bad feeling she could easily be led down the same path to ruin. The potential of another Will Shaw catastrophe was beating on her door. For all she knew, Cullen was married.

"Are you married?" she blurted and blushed.

"Nope. You?"

"No." *Everyone knew that, didn't they?*

"Look, I'll get your things for you. Nobody knows you're here, and nobody needs to until you're ready to leave." He paused and stood, then took a large step back. "I'm not like the others. I'm not going to hurt you," he said again.

She wanted so badly to believe him. Her heart said to trust, but her mind wouldn't let her forget she'd trusted once before. Yet she had nowhere else to go and nothing waiting for her but a bleak, empty recovery. She couldn't travel through the snow in this condition. And it would be a few days, at the least, before she could protect herself from any raptor threats headed her way.

She considered him. Staring up at Cullen, she soon found herself lost in a strange haze of lust and comfort. *What the hell. What can a few days under the radar hurt? If Cullen really wanted to harm me, he could have several times already.*

Sarah sighed. "I'll stay, but just until I've healed."

He ran a hand lightly over her hair.

She gasped, not sure what odd fire had taken hold of her body.

"Drink your tea. I'll be back later."

Why his words felt like a promise of something more, Sarah couldn't say. She watched him leave the room while the fire crackled next to her. Despite the heat, Cullen's absence seemed to sap the warmth from her bones. She shivered in the chair, sipping her tea and wishing for answers she didn't have.



## Chapter Three

Sarah spent the next two days much like the first. Cullen barely spoke, which reassured her more than his earlier attempts at conversation had. He spent much of his time outside in the barn he called his workspace while she slept and relaxed into better health.

Shifting from injured bird to human had sped her healing, but Sarah's wounds were deep. Jenny was such a bitch; she deserved to be married to Dennis. Sarah smirked at the memory of her shrieking as Cullen sank his claws into her.

She still couldn't believe he'd done that. Interfering with a clan leader's mate wouldn't put Cullen in high standing. She feared he'd get into trouble because of her. But would Jenny risk the clan knowing she and four others had gone after Sarah? Though Jenny would likely receive no more than a slap on the wrist for involving others in her fight, Sarah doubted the woman would want her name and Sarah's linked, for any reason. Bad enough her pride had been pricked that anyone thought her husband had screwed Sarah Duncan, *nobody extraordinaire*.

"God, I hate when I pity myself." Sarah slowly stood from the couch and stretched, her newly healed muscles protesting the strain.

Large hands settled on her shoulders, scaring the bejesus out of her. She screamed and would have pulled away, but Cullen wouldn't let go.

"Easy," he murmured, kneading the tension from her shoulders. "You okay?"

"Thanks for the heart attack," she snapped, hoping he'd step away. This attraction for Mr. Strong and Silent was growing. She couldn't be within two feet of the man without wanting him. Her nipples hardened, her stomach quivered, and her sex grew wet with want. If she didn't know better, she'd think she was in heat.

Thankfully, raptors didn't have heats like some of the other animal clans did. Which made her reaction to Cullen more baffling, because her bird felt the attraction as much as the human half of her did. With Will, her sexual experience had been fully human—enthraling, exciting, and ultimately disappointing. She had the strangest notion that sex with Cullen would be anything but.

"Easy," he said again. His hands smoothed her shoulders while avoiding her injury, his fingers pushing into the very tops of her breasts.

His touch shot sparks through her body. Her sex responded by drenching her panties. He stilled, and she wished she could see behind her. His hold made it impossible for her to turn around.

“Feel better?” he asked in that gravelly voice that once again soothed her need for flight.

Without realizing it, she leaned back against him. “Better,” she murmured, wanting his hands lower. Her nipples ached, needing to be touched. Her bra and shirt did nothing but stifle the sensitive flesh, when with just a touch of Cullen’s hot mouth, Sarah knew she could—

She leaped forward, thoroughly horrified by her erotic thoughts.

“You okay?”

She turned to see him frown. Thankfully, his gaze remained on her face.

“Fine. Just fine.” She forced a smile and glanced beyond him at the small mantle clock. “You done for the day, then?”

He nodded.

“Would you like me to make dinner tonight?” she asked. They’d fallen into a comfortable routine. Cullen worked outside most of the day—and why he’d said he needed company when he was never in the house she didn’t know—coming in sporadically to check on her. He fixed them breakfast and lunch, simple meals that tasted fantastic. What that man could do with egg noodles, vegetables and roast beef was amazing.

“Relax.” His gaze traveled down her front, as she’d feared. She could have sworn his eyes narrowed on her breasts, but he blinked and turned away so fast she might have imagined it. “I’ll cook.”

Once again, the man of few words disappeared, which was just what she wanted. So why did his absences disturb her? Cullen had invited—nearly demanded—that she recuperate with him in his house, then went out of his way to avoid her. It didn’t make sense. During the time she’d spent alone in the house, she’d poked and peered through enough to know he spoke the truth about not having a wife and living with his family.

Most Ac-taw lived in groups. The raptors and silver foxes had the largest population in upper Montana, next to the gray wolves. Many raptor families lived together as a unit, like Cullen and his family. She knew he had three other brothers, but she’d never met them or his mother in the diner. During her snooping ventures, she’d seen all of their bedrooms.

The house boasted two floors and six thousand square feet. Cullen had given her a brief tour that first day, introducing her to a den, a spacious living room, a kitchen with an adjacent dining area, and a surprisingly modern media room. Located up in the mountains, the house also had a large porch doubling as a perch. She could easily imagine the family shifting and flying up into the sky from such a place.

On the second floor, there were six bedrooms, and another three on the main floor. A lot of space for five people. Five *strangers*. Sarah couldn’t help being glad Cullen’s family was away. It was hard enough to trust Cullen, despite the fact he’d been nothing but kind to her—when he’d been around.

Pots and pans clattered in the kitchen, drawing her attention. Wanting to watch him in action, Sarah disregarded the idea to keep her distance, a safe enough response, and drew closer to the man that wouldn’t

leave her thoughts. In the short time she'd spent in Cullen's home, she'd only grown more captivated by him.

He was short on words and long on action. He rose early each morning and went to bed early as well. He worked long hours in his converted barn, but was courteous enough to continue to feed her. His wounded bird, she thought with ill humor. It was important to her that he see her as an independent woman, something he'd never do if he continued to wait on her whenever he was in the house.

"Cullen, I can help," she offered when she saw him sautéing what looked like chicken in a cast-iron skillet.

"Sit down."

His curt tone didn't bother her, though she didn't know why. The man had little in the way of manners, though his actions showed him to be a considerate host.

Sarah sighed and sat at the centered kitchen island. "Did anyone ever tell you you're bossy?"

He whipped his head around and stared at her, as if surprised.

"Oh, please. Don't tell me your family hasn't noticed."

He grinned, fanning the flames of desire in her once more. "Sean's called me a dictator once or twice."

"Is he the youngest?"

"Micah's five years older, Sean's two, then there's me, and Ian, the baby."

"Baby?"

"My mother still calls him that. *Her baby*." A devious look passed over Cullen's face. "He's twenty-five years old."

Sarah grinned. "That's evil. I like it."

Cullen laughed then sobered as he stared at her in silence, his gaze penetrating as it wavered from her eyes over her face to her mouth. He finally turned back to the stove.

*What the hell was that about?* "Ah, Cullen?"

"What?" He kept his back to her as he fiddled with their dinner.

"I just wanted to thank you, again, for letting me stay here. If there's anything I can do to help while I'm here, let me know. I would have taken over the kitchen chores, but I didn't want to get in your way."

"Then don't."

Silence filled the kitchen once more.

"You're not one for conversation, are you? A real caveman," she joked.

He didn't say anything, and she had the oddest notion she'd hurt his feelings.

"I'm just kidding. You're a very nice man." Was it her imagination, or did he cringe? "You've been nothing but hospitable, and I really appreciate it." He hadn't made a pass or anything. And that shouldn't

have bothered her in the slightest. Instead, she wondered what was so wrong with her that Cullen wasn't interested. *Stupid woman*, her bird snapped. *Shut up, bird*.

"I'm, ah, not used to company. Outside of family, I mean," he muttered.

"You all live here all the time?" she asked, curious about his family.

"Yeah."

Great, another one-word answer. Trying to learn more about Cullen Whitefeather from the man himself was like pulling teeth. If it weren't for those strange, intense looks he gave her, she'd think him totally immune to her presence.

Cullen slid whatever he had cooked in the skillet onto two plates, then grabbed forks and joined her at the island.

"Dig in."

He didn't wait for her, but tore into his food like a man possessed. Kind of the way he ate at the diner, all business. Still, watching him was like looking at a work of art. The way his forearms bunched, the muscles prominent beneath the rolled-up sleeves of his flannel shirt. The strong chords of his throat as he swallowed. The steady rise and fall of his muscular chest, so close, yet not close enough to touch...

"Sarah?"

She met his gaze, embarrassed to be caught staring. "Ah, I was wondering..." She paused, not knowing what to say.

"Yeah?" His face was inscrutable.

"Where did you learn to cook?" That sounded innocuous enough.

He visibly relaxed, and she relaxed with him.

"My mother. She taught all of us how to cook, but I like it." He stopped himself and she leaned forward.

"Tell me more. I like hearing you talk."

He looked surprised. "My mother made sure all her sons could fend for themselves at an early age."

"You really love her, don't you?" Sarah liked the fact that Cullen loved his mother. Nothing about him screamed *momma's boy*. Instead, she sensed a genuine affection for his mother and brothers, no matter how many times he swore at them on the phone when they called at night.

"I do. What about you? Your mother's gone now, isn't she?" he asked softly.

Sarah's heart dropped. "I loved my mother more than I can say. She's been gone for eight years, and I still miss her. Car accident."

"Sorry," he said gruffly.

"Sometimes I think I smell her perfume, like she's watching over me." She refused to cry in front of him. "My friend Julia and I sometimes talk about her."

"Julia?"

“She’s a silver fox. She works for Gerald Winters, the town attorney.”

Cullen shrugged. “I don’t go into town much, outside the diner. Just work up here in the mountains, carving wood.”

“All of you do it?” she prodded, pleased he hadn’t yet clammed up on her.

“Micah and I do most of the work. Ian’s our business guru. Mom works advertising and PR.”

“Nice. A family business. It’s a good thing you all get along.”

He grunted. “Mostly.”

“What about your other brother? What does he do?”

“Sean irritates me for a living,” Cullen growled.

She grinned. She’d heard Cullen use a few choice words when talking to Sean just last night. “From what I hear, every family has one.”

“A black sheep?” he asked.

“A pain in the ass,” she answered, grinning like a fool when he laughed with her.

“You surprise me, Sarah Duncan.” Cullen took their empty plates to the sink and joined her once more.

“Why’s that?”

Cullen didn’t say. He nodded at a bottle of wine sitting on the counter. “Want some?”

“Sure.”

He poured them both a glass, and then nudged her toward the living room, where a glorious fire blazed while it continued to snow outside. The weather had ceased being pretty and turned viciously dangerous last night, when pelts of ice rained on the rooftop.

“You’re herding me like a dog,” she muttered.

“Someone has to.”

“Excuse me?” She turned to face him, startled to find him so close.

Before she could say anything else, he took the wine from her hand and placed it next to his glass on a side table.

“Shut up, Sarah.”

She opened her mouth in shock, only to blink as he covered it with his own. Hot didn’t begin to describe how he made her burn.

Cullen had tried his damndest, but he just couldn’t stay away any longer. The woman tormented him. It was bad enough he mooned over her whenever he went into town. But having her here, under his roof, just a few doors down from his bedroom every night was killing him. He’d jerked off more in the past few days than he had all last month.

Those sultry glances of hers followed him everywhere. He caught her scent whenever he turned, and he had a hard time ignoring those full, ripe breasts with nipples so tight he wanted to bite and suck them until she came.

A better man than he would have resisted her temptation. Damn it all, Cullen was no saint.

Sucking in her sweet breath, he captured her lips with a groan. He'd been getting better at stringing words together in her presence. "Shut up" probably wasn't the wisest thing he could have told her, but he needed her so damned badly.

She tasted like warm wine, the scent of chardonnay lingering on her lips like a perfume. Bold and heady, her taste went straight to his head...and his cock.

He shifted against her, unable to keep still, especially when she squirmed in his arms.

"Cullen," she protested when he pulled back.

Not sure if her protest was because of the kiss or because he'd stopped it, he slowly returned to her mouth, giving her a chance to resist. To his delight, she leaned into him and pulled his face close for another kiss. Heaven and hell in the same breath. He wanted nothing more than to strip her naked and shove deeply inside her. To claim what was his, to come inside his mate and bind her to him with love and affection.

The past two days he'd given her space, time enough to show her he wouldn't hurt her, and time enough to get his unruly hormones under control.

But this kiss shot that dubious control all to hell.

He wrapped his arms around her, conscious of her injuries. But she would have none of it. Sarah held tight, stroking the nape of his neck with fingers he could easily imagine doing the same to his aching shaft.

"Mmm," she murmured, opening her mouth to accept his invading tongue.

He sought her warmth, enraptured by the beauty of the woman caged in his arms. She fit so perfectly. Did she know they were fated to be? Could she feel how hard his heart beat just for her? Could she sense how much he loved her, with every fiber of his being?

He didn't know and was afraid to ask. Unlike his brothers, he'd never felt comfortable with a woman. He didn't know what to say or how to act, didn't know how to respond to flirtation. He was no virgin, but Cullen's experiences with women started and ended with sex. Sarah was the only woman he'd ever cared enough about to want to get to know.

*So don't fuck it up by coming in your pants at your first kiss,* he warned himself.

Forcing himself to ease back before he did just that, Cullen continued to hold Sarah, more than aware of her full breasts that had been so lovingly pressed against his chest.

"I, ah, have a few more things to do outside," he breathed, fiercely glad to see Sarah just as winded.

"Outside, right," she rasped, staring hard at his mouth. "I, um, think I'll have a bath and soak out some of this tension."

She sounded so sexy. All he could think about was Sarah naked, water sliding over her breasts and belly, over her thighs and between those plump lips guarding her sex. He wanted to lick the water from her clit, to dive into the moisture of her channel and lap her up like a stick of candy.

Fuck, his hard-on was getting worse. He stepped back before he took her on the damned couch beside them.

“You need help with that bath?” he asked, praying she’d say yes, knowing the cautious woman would say no.

Sarah stared at his face with wide eyes. Her gaze moved slowly down his body, centering on his obvious erection. She licked her lips, and he groaned.

She parted her full lips. “Cullen—”

“Right. I’ll be outside if you need me,” he rumbled before she could reject him, needing a cold shower of his own. A walk through the snow sounded like just the thing.

But as he hurried from the house, he could see her in his mind’s eye, naked in the tub, her arms open, waiting for him as she parted her lips and her thighs in welcome...

“If only,” he wished aloud. “But I’ll be damned if I know how much longer I can keep myself from you. The time’s coming, Sarah. Sooner rather than later, you’ll be mine. And then it’s a matter of finding out how to keep you.”

## Chapter Four

“You sure you’ll be okay with just one?” Cullen asked for the third time four hours later.

Sarah clutched the massive blanket to her chest, not sure how to handle this chatty man. “I’m fine, Cullen. I’m good.” She paused, not sure what to make of the shuttered look he directed her way. It was lusty, but also something more. “Thanks for everything. You’ve been nicer to me than anyone has in a long time, and I appreciate it.”

Instead of accepting her thanks, he scowled. “Yeah, sure. Good night.” He turned and left, slamming a door somewhere in the massive house.

She didn’t understand the man. After the kiss they’d recently shared, he should have been in a better mood. If he’d wanted sex from her, he could have had it. God knew she couldn’t have said no, *didn’t* say no, as a matter of fact. As it was, he’d been the one to end their embrace before tearing out of the house like a shot.

She knew he wanted her, but he denied himself, unlike most of the men she’d grown up with. Cullen didn’t take what was offered, for some unknown reason. And his distance intrigued her even more, attracting her like a moth to flame.

Lord, but sex with Cullen was going to be spectacular. She’d stopped lying to herself sometime during her bath. As much as she might have wished differently, Sarah desired Cullen. In just a few days, she’d leave Cougar Falls and everything else behind her. Why not indulge in a harmless affair? Even if Cullen did spread the news to the rest of the town—and she didn’t think he would—she’d be long gone by then.

*So why does the thought of leaving suddenly feel like the wrong thing to do?*

Afraid her answer had to do with her baffling host, she closed the door to the spare bedroom he’d given her and looked past the finely crafted furnishings, lingering on a picture of his family on the dresser.

All of the Whitefeather men looked alike. Cullen was the spitting image of his father, so Sarah knew what his mother had seen in the man. In the photo, the family grinned like loons while they balanced precariously on top of a cliff.

“Must love danger,” she murmured, thinking of the danger he might face from the raptor clan after she left town. She wondered, not for the first time, what kind of repercussions Cullen might have to deal with for injuring Jenny Larsen.



She couldn't let him get in trouble because of her. Though she hadn't asked for his help, without it she would have been seriously injured, if not dead. The gruff man had a heart of gold in that ill-mannered chest. He was still curt to the point of rudeness, yet he touched her with nothing but gentleness.

He'd gone out of his way to cook her the best damned meals she'd ever had. His skill in the kitchen amazed her. So why would a man who could cook like that visit the Fox's Henhouse so often? It couldn't be for the company, not when he didn't associate with anyone much. Sarah often ate at the diner, so as not to have to face her nights alone at a solemn kitchen table. She didn't think that was the case with Cullen, not with three brothers and his mother here waiting for him.

She wasn't sure when she'd begun to trust Cullen, but she knew deep down he'd never hurt her. Nor could she imagine him spreading rumors about her in town. Hell, the man was more isolated from the clan than Sarah. And attacking Mike and Jenny wasn't the best way to influence new friendships. He hadn't taken advantage of her stay, and he hadn't forced himself on her at all. Unlike the men in town who promised forever, Cullen promised nothing, which made her want him all the more.

After her debacle with Will had died down, or so she'd thought, some of the raptor men had proven to be friendly, though she couldn't find it in herself to trust them. A few of the women befriended her, while other clans didn't spare her much attention, sensing the dissent toward her in her own clan. Still, life could have been worse. At least in Cougar Falls she had people who knew what she was, if not who she was. Being a Shifter out in the world of humans would be a scary place—*but a necessary place*, she reminded herself.

The one and only true friend Sarah had was up to her neck in trouble in the state of Washington. Julia, a silver fox and legal assistant, was working like mad to hide her sisters from a bunch of rogue hunters who knew about the Ac-taw.

With the threat of their existence a constant danger, most Shifters chose to remain in Cougar Falls. A magical totem protected the town from outsiders, and only those with a connection to the land and Shifter ancestry could even find the place.

But when Sarah considered the rest of her life, when she saw families playing, husbands and wives kissing, she ached deep inside. Leaving Cougar Falls was her only option. Mike Shaw and Rob Jenkins only represented what most of the raptor clan thought but didn't say. Then again, she was staying with a man who didn't say much, yet she knew he didn't think of her as a woman of loose morals. Confusion filled her as she stared at Cullen's handsome picture on the dresser.

He baffled her. Who was Cullen Whitefeather? As much of a predator as he was, he hadn't made a move on her until tonight. And he'd given her a room with a lock, as well as the only two keys to the door.

Cullen did his best to show her she was safe here, until she'd catch him watching her with those eagle eyes, eyes that missed nothing. Had he seen her unwilling attraction to him? Did he know how many times

she'd gazed at his mouth, wondering how he'd kiss? She wasn't sure if her eager response to him was the result of chemistry or an awakened need for physical intimacy.

She wished she had more to go by when it came to sexual experience. If she was half the slut she'd been painted to be, she'd have thrown him to the ground and jumped his bones. Instead, pathetic nobody that she was, Sarah blushed every time she caught him looking at her.

God, even her subconscious was confused. She'd spent the past few days dwelling on the innuendos about her sexual promiscuity, yet she lusted after the man who'd saved her.

Disgruntled that she couldn't seem to dwell on anything without Cullen's face clouding her thoughts, Sarah changed into the flannel pajamas she'd packed, turned out the light, and curled up in bed under the heavy blanket Cullen had given her. She should have been tired, but she couldn't sleep.

She'd spent the day alternately reading and watching television. Cullen's media room held a number of recent movie titles she'd wanted to see, and she'd filled the afternoon immersed in fantasy worlds where the hero took down the villain and got the girl in the end. A happy ending, at least for someone.

Watching such fantasy, Sarah had imagined Cullen in the lead role. The mysterious hero, so silent, so strong. Curiously, his quiet freed her from worry. She liked being around him. She couldn't deny she loved looking at him, though she hoped she'd been a bit less obvious in her gawking than he'd been while staring at her. Cullen had a body made for sin, streamlined muscles that could cradle a wounded bird to his chest or lash out at an enemy in a heartbeat. His shoulder-length black hair looked so silky and fine. She wanted to run her fingers through it, to stroke him as she would a feathered bird. His eyes captivated. So dark one minute, so bright gold the next. He was like a wild animal held in thrall by magical means.

*Cullen, her bird sighed with longing. Mine.*

Lost in another argument with her animal spirit, she started when he knocked on the door.

"Yes?" she called out.

The knob turned slowly. She hadn't locked it tonight. Funny he chose this night to visit.

He stepped inside and flicked on the light, dressed in his jeans and nothing else.

*Good Lord, I'm in heaven.* His sculpted muscles rippled as he moved, his stomach a washboard of temptation that had her fingers itching so badly to *touch*.

"I wanted to check on your injuries, and to make sure you don't need anything before I go to sleep."

She'd gently refused his assistance since he'd patched her up. Sarah could have seen to herself just fine tonight, but a niggling urge to have his hands on her took away any sense of caution. "Uh, okay."

Cullen sat on the edge of her bed while she answered, apparently planning on helping her whether she wanted him to or not. Excitement, not fear, pulsed in her veins. He pulled the covers down to her waist and shook his head when she moved.

"No, lie there. I'll do it." His voice sounded deeper, huskier.

She nodded. He slowly unbuttoned her flannel top from the bottom to just under her breasts. Pushing the material aside, he ran a hot hand over her ribs and the prickle of a scar bruising her belly.

“Looks good.”

*Feels incredible.* “Oh, uh, right. It’s healing. No problem.” She could barely speak, so absorbed with the warmth bleeding through his palm. Her breasts felt heavy, and her sex pulsed with a need she’d never before felt, not even with Will.

“How about the other one?”

“Other what?”

He rubbed her belly with a caressing touch, so gentle, yet so erotic it was all she could do not to moan her pleasure.

“Your other wound, the one between your, uh, under the last button.” He licked his lips, the motion drawing her attention to that firm, gorgeous mouth. “Sarah?” he asked, his breathing ragged.

She couldn’t think past the need boiling within her. Her inner raptor flailed wildly, wanting to get as close as possible to Cullen Whitefeather. “I don’t know,” she breathed.

Cullen slid the last button free. Her shirt gaped, but didn’t fall apart until he pushed the sides away, baring her breasts.

“Damn,” he rasped, staring not at the slight line on her skin, but on the aching points of her nipples.

“Cullen,” she whispered.

He ran a knuckle over the fading injury. “Almost healed,” he said, brushing the underside of her breasts. “How does it feel?”

“It aches,” she admitted, meaning her breasts, her body, her desire for this man she didn’t really know, but needed with her last breath.

“Yeah,” he agreed and lowered his head. The feel of his mouth over her breast stunned her. And then he sucked on her nipple, and she lost her will to do anything but feel.

He cupped her other breast, kneading and teasing it until she wanted to scream. All the while, he tormented her nipple with small bites and the generous suction of his talented mouth.

She groaned his name when he left her, only to sigh when he lavished her other breast with the same attention. Squirming to relieve the tension in her body, she still wasn’t prepared when he slid a hand beneath the waist of her pajama bottoms.

“Shh, trust me,” he whispered, leaning up to meet her gaze. His eyes were bright gold, blinding in their intensity.

“I do,” she replied with the truth. Cullen had breached the defenses she’d built. Before she could discern how he’d done so, his magical fingers found their way between her legs, into the very heat of her. “*Oh, Cullen.*”

“That’s it, sweet. Let go.” He returned his mouth to her breast, no longer gentle, but with greater zeal, pulling the ecstasy from her with each suck of his mouth. He used his thumb on her clitoris and pumped into her with his fingers, finding a curious sensitivity inside her that made her want to burst.

He left her breasts and kissed her mouth. And it wasn’t enough. She wanted to feel him, all of him. Over her, in her. His fingers moved faster, and her arousal skyrocketed.

Moaning into his mouth, she arched higher, scraping her sensitized nipples against his rock-hard chest. He deepened the kiss, stabbing her with his tongue the way his fingers stabbed into her channel. Just when she thought she couldn’t take any more, he ground his thumb against her clit and she came.

Crying out at the sheer pleasure overloading her system, she couldn’t think. Sarah wasn’t aware of Cullen moving until she felt his trembling fingers buttoning her back into her shirt.

“Cullen?” she whispered, wanting to taste him once more.

“Rest easy,” he said, his voice as thick as the straining jeans at his crotch. Far from unaffected, Cullen nevertheless rose, grimacing in discomfort. “That was for you. Good night, Sarah.”

“Good night, Cullen.” She watched him leave, unable to think of anything else to say. Her brains were fried, her body a pulsating mess of nerves and excitement and—*oh my God, Cullen had his hands all over me.*

The man could have done anything to her after sending her to such bliss, yet he’d walked away, clearly not satisfied. Such a selfless thing to do, to bring her such joy.

Sarah wanted to go after him, to end his suffering and experience that wonderful ecstasy once more. She wanted to demand an explanation, to know why he would do such a thing. But she needed to sift through her thoughts before she confronted him. Meaning to do just that, she instead fell into a warm and dreamless sleep with a large smile on her face.

Cullen groaned as he pumped his erection, imagining Sarah on her knees before him. That luscious mouth would swallow him deep, taking him to the back of her throat. She’d fondle his balls, pushing him toward the rush only she could give him. Her tits would bounce as she went down on him, her mouth moving over him with a generosity only a woman in love would give.

At the image, he groaned and came in his hand, spurting over the shower tiles. He lowered his head under the spray of lukewarm water and shivered, from the temperature as well as the memory of Sarah’s hot, wet pussy coating his fingers. God, that had been a dream come true. He still couldn’t believe she’d let him touch her so intimately. Best of all, he hadn’t fucked it up by saying the wrong thing. He’d let his instincts lead the way, and damned if he hadn’t done it all just right.

Sarah Duncan had wanted him.

The woman hadn’t been dreaming or dazed. She’d been with him every step of the way. She’d responded as if she’d been made for him.

*His mate.* Of course she'd responded. She didn't know it yet, but their animal spirits had bonded. Hell, he'd felt it months before when he'd first walked into the diner and seen her there, though he hadn't wanted to acknowledge it. Cullen lived a solitary life. Except for his family, he didn't have much to do with other Ac-taw. The only Shifters he didn't mind much were the catamounts and a few foxes and wolves. Most of his own kind he couldn't stand. Except for Sarah Duncan.

Shivering, he turned off the water and hurriedly dried himself off. He was spent, both physically and emotionally. Stuck in the house with her because of the snow, he'd done his damndest to work off his lust in his woodshop. He'd finished one project early and started another before he realized he was wasting quality time with his mate.

But he also knew Sarah needed her space. She'd been through a lot in very little time. He hadn't intended to take advantage of her tonight, only to make sure she was recovering. It still pissed him off that his being nice to her was something she couldn't take for granted. Sarah should be used to others caring for her. Ac-taw were supposed to help one another. *Yeah, right. That's why the raptors are such a backstabbing clan. Because they support one another.* The notion only reinforced his decision to do something about the clan.

He and his family had talked about it more than once. They didn't like the current raptor leadership, but didn't know exactly how to deal with it. Micah wanted to move north, into Canada. He, Sean, Ian and Mother were visiting their blood relatives with the hopes of doing just that. Cullen, however, didn't want to leave his hunting grounds, his home. He just wanted to leave the damned clan. But if he did that, he'd have to leave town.

He'd thought about joining with the catamounts, who were known to accept Ac-taw of any species into their family, so long as they passed Chastell standards—whatever the hell those were. The Chastells were an odd lot. Cats, a pair of bears, and supposedly a wolf, now living together under one clan. Those Ac-taw looked after one another. Animal shape meant less than loyalty as a unit. *That* he respected.

Stumbling into bed, Cullen realistically had to consider *all* his options. If Sarah was dead set on leaving, he'd have no choice but to go with her. But what if she didn't want him? Worry filled him, that his mate would deny their connection. He wouldn't blame her if she did. She'd been treated horribly by her clan, by fellow raptors who should have protected her.

He hadn't been part of the raptor clan when Sarah's trials with Will Shaw had happened, or he would have fixed the mess himself. Now that he was a part of the raptors, he had a responsibility to defend her. *Yeah, right. That's what you feel,* responsibility. He glanced down at his semi-erect cock, wondering what it was about the woman that made him so hard all the time. If his mother were here, he'd ask her more about this damned mating instinct. But he had no intention of going into this over the phone. If he did, his family would wing it home in a heartbeat, regardless of the storm. And then his brothers would scare Sarah away. That is, if he hadn't already by taking things too fast in her bedroom.

Christ, he'd only meant to help her. He hadn't intended to fall under her spell, but he was only human—half human. His eagle didn't help matters. His damned bird cried for her all the time. To his relief, Sarah had responded to him. She couldn't hate him, not if she moaned his name and arched up for him. She'd been so damned wet...

"Hell." He groaned and rolled over on his belly, smashing his unruly dick against the bed. Time to think of a better way to get into Sarah's good graces. Sex was all well and good, but he didn't see her accepting him on the merits of his dick.

He wasn't exactly a charming guy. His lack of social skills was readily apparent any time he opened his mouth. At least he'd given her an orgasm, so she'd see he had something going for him. Then again, she'd been in a proclaimed dry spell for a while, so maybe she was just needy? He didn't want to believe she'd let him touch her out of desperation. But she had every intention of leaving as soon as the snow cleared. She wasn't in love with him. How the hell was he going to win her over?

Tired and confused about what to do to secure his mate, Cullen fell into a troubled sleep, a scowl on his face as he dreamt about flying alone, forever denied his true love.

## Chapter Five

Cullen didn't know what to expect the next morning, but it wasn't Sarah's shy smile as she handed him a mug of coffee when he entered the kitchen. Relieved she didn't demand to leave, he nodded politely.

"Good morning," she said with a blush on her face.

He stared from the coffee to her then took a slow, deliberate sip. She really made the best coffee. "Yeah."

She met his eyes and glanced away. "Would you like me to make you something to eat?"

"No." He put his coffee down and prodded her to sit. "Sit down." He winced when the words came out sounding like a command. To his relief, Sarah sat, with a pleasant smile on her face. He poured her a cup of coffee and added sugar and a hint of milk.

"Thanks." She took a sip. "Perfect. You know just how I like it."

He turned, suddenly embarrassed, and mumbled, "You want an omelet?"

"Whatever you're having. You're such a great cook, Cullen. I don't know why you bother coming into the diner so often. You put Mac to shame."

"I love your coffee," he admitted while foraging for ingredients. "Cheese and ham okay?"

"Sure." Sarah stared hard at him. He could feel her gaze on his back. "About last night..."

He busied himself at the stove and tensed when he felt her behind him. *Here it comes. A discussion of why she has to leave, why it can never happen again...* She stunned him by wrapping her arms around his waist.

"You're incredible."

She kissed his back, and his entire body turned to stone. His dick throbbed, and he had to focus on his breathing. "So are you," he managed, well enough that she sat back down and began chattering about the weather and his work in the barn while he cooked their breakfast.

"What are you making now, in your workshop, I mean?" she asked.

Cullen took a deep breath and willed his erection to fade sometime before the end of the year. "I'm finishing up one of Micah's projects, a crib for Rachel Chastell. Burke wants to surprise her with it."

"She's pregnant?" Something in Sarah's voice made him turn around.

"I didn't ask. Why?"

Sarah sighed. "You'll think I'm an idiot. I like Rachel a lot. She's always been so nice to me. I even forgave her for marrying Burke last year." Sarah laughed.

“Forgave her?”

“I had a crush on Burke for the longest time, but he was never interested in me. Then I met Will... Anyway, after the rumors started, most of the town just avoided me.”

The way Cullen had, only he'd avoided her because he was half in love with her and didn't know how to tell her.

“Burke used to be nice to me and then he was distant. He must have believed Mike's rumors, which hurt. I thought he was better than that.”

“So you have a thing for him, hmm?” Cullen wanted to rip Chastell's throat out.

“No. I *had* a thing for him. Trust me, it faded a while ago, even before he met Rachel. I only used to flirt with him at the diner because it annoyed him.” Her eyes twinkled, and the tension in Cullen eased. “That cat is so easy to rile. Invade his space and he snarls.” She snickered. “He deserved it. Sanctimonious cat. Guys can have sex all the time and no one cares. But if you're a woman and you make a mistake, you're a slut. Gimme a break.” She stopped her tirade and concentrated on her coffee.

“Sorry for going off. It's one of my favorite rants,” she mumbled. When he said nothing, she lifted her head and stared at him. “You're easy to talk to, you know? You don't say much, but I don't mind. I feel like I can fill the silence or not, but that you'll listen. Or am I just being stupid? I'll shut up now.”

“You're not stupid, Sarah,” he said quietly, falling even deeper under her spell. Her openness was just one of the things he loved about her.

“I have a bad habit of saying too much. I probably shouldn't have told everyone about raptor business in the diner the other day, but I'm sick of Mike's comments.”

“Don't be sorry.” Cullen grabbed the skillet off the stove and slid the omelet onto a plate for Sarah. He knew it wasn't his business, but he wanted to know. “Why the hell would you fall for Will Shaw in the first place?” *You could have any guy you wanted. Why him?*

She shrugged. “I was young and lonely. It felt like all the guys wanted me for one thing and one thing only. I wanted to fit in with the raptors as more than just Mimi's orphaned girl. Will didn't seem like the others. He talked to me and made me feel special. I had never been with a guy before him.”

“And after?” *Shut up, Cullen. She's talking, don't scare her with questions that aren't your business...yet.*

“Cullen, I learn from my mistakes.” She blushed. “I'm not, I don't... Just because last night happened doesn't mean—”

Cullen stared, incredulous. “*Hell*. He was the only one, wasn't he?”

“I don't think that's any of your business.” Her cheeks turned a bright red.

“You're right. I'm sorry.” Stunned and elated, he tried to hold onto his composure. He sat next to her, trying to figure her out. A woman this pretty, this smart, and she'd never been with anyone but one man?

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”



“You are so beautiful,” he blurted, still shocked at her revelation.

“Huh?” Sarah stared back at him. “You think I’m beautiful?”

Realizing he sounded moronic, he nodded and stood. “I have work to do. See you later.” He left before he did something brainless and admitted he’d fallen in love with her. That would scare her away for sure. A crude loner like Cullen Whitefeather in love with an angel like Sarah? Talk about a praying for a miracle. They were mates, maybe, but not by her design.

Grumbling under his breath about asshole cats and ragged raptors, Cullen returned to what he was good at. Silence and trade. Still agitated, he decided to unwind by working on the finishing touches for the crib. Refining the wooden carvings, he immersed himself in work, trying hard not to imagine his own child in a similar crib, staring up at him with Sarah’s eyes.

Sarah stared out the back door at a retreating Cullen, bewildered and ecstatic all at once. Cullen thought she was beautiful. She felt warm all over, awash in his praise. The man normally couldn’t string two words together without sounding stilted, but when he looked at her the way he had, she wanted to melt at his feet.

She ate every bite of the omelet he’d given her and marveled at his skill. When it came to using his hands, Cullen Whitefeather was a wizard. Woodworking, cooking, lovemaking... She flushed, recalling how talented he’d been last night.

Her brief time with Will had been all about Will getting his pleasure. He’d touched her and kissed her, but nothing along the intensity of what Cullen had done.

Sarah was no prude. She’d waited a long time to have sex, but she’d done it because she’d thought herself in love. Though she no longer equated lust with love, she still needed to experience the physical act of sex with a tandem emotional connection. Unfortunately, she hadn’t met anyone worthy of that lovemaking. Until now.

Frankly, she blamed the raptor inside her. The birds mated for life. Unlike Will and Dennis, when Sarah took a mate, she intended to remain faithful to him. Having sex didn’t necessitate a trip down the aisle, she knew, but taking a lover would never be a casual thing for her.

Which made her attraction to Cullen so incredible. Physically, the man pressed all her buttons. A woman would have to be dead or gay not to feel something for the sensual male with eyes to die for and abs worth worshipping. She loved a man with large hands, and Cullen had hands not only huge, but rough from work.

*Oh, baby, can he work with his hands.*

The thought made her wonder if he was as big all over, because, to her regret, she didn’t have firsthand experience with his body. She didn’t know what to think about him leaving her last night. That

he'd given her such pleasure still made her shudder in remembrance. But that he'd given her the experience without expecting anything in return spoke volumes to his character.

Cullen was a giver, while she had been taking since she'd arrived.

He'd engaged in a raptor battle and injured a clan leader's mate for *her*. He'd saved her from possible death, cooked and took care of her, then gave her the kind of loving she'd always dreamed about. Despite his size and speed, he made her feel safe, not threatened.

Sarah needed to give him something back, but she had nothing on hand. Nothing but herself. She gnawed her lip, clearly remembering the desire in Cullen's gaze as he'd stared at her, as well as his departure while looking uncomfortably aroused. The first time in years she'd wanted to say "yes" wholeheartedly to a man and he'd left her alone in bed.

She could only imagine what making love with him would be like.

Arousal overwhelmed her as she thought about seducing Cullen. The more she thought about it, the more her bird cheered. *He's not mine, but maybe he can be mine for a night or two.* She squelched a surprising surge of disappointment, trying to remain realistic.

Just because Cullen had treated her with respect and tenderness didn't mean he'd fall all over himself in love with her. From what Sarah had seen, she wasn't all that loveable in the eyes of the opposite sex. Fuckable, maybe, but loveable? Not one male in her clan had stood up for her when Will had made his accusations. Only Cullen had defended her this last time. But he was so closemouthed, she had no idea what he really thought of her.

He said he wanted her company. Well, today she planned to give him some company he'd have a hard time forgetting. Sarah chuckled, pleased with the thought of being in charge for once.

She'd thank Cullen properly, *her way*.

Four hours later, Cullen walked back inside the house and froze. Cedar and spice filled the air. A fire blazed in the hearth. On the opposite side of the spacious living room, a small plate of meats and cheeses sat, accompanied by a bottle of wine and two glasses.

Sarah walked out of the kitchen carrying his favorite brand of Scotch, which she put on the scarred coffee table. "Hi, Cullen. I hope you don't mind." She hit play on his stereo.

"Mind?" Was that some of Ian's jazz? Mood music and tiny food? What the hell was going on?

"I just wanted to do something nice for you since you've been so gracious with me. I thought we could have an early lunch and spend the rest of the day together."

Together sounded good to him. And speaking of lunch, Sarah looked good enough to eat, dressed in jeans and a thin red sweater that hugged her upper body like a second skin. He'd held those breasts last night, had tasted the peaks of her nipples as he'd sucked them to life.

“Yeah, sure.” Cullen took a deep breath and tried to subtly shift the erection straining his jeans as he walked toward her. He exhaled slowly and studied her, feeling a hint of threat from the slender woman that made little sense. His eagle told him to be wary, but he could read nothing in her body language that hinted at danger, unless coming in his jeans would kill him.

Sarah didn't look angry or sad, so his earlier avoidance hadn't upset her. If anything, she looked happy. Damn, maybe he should disappear again tomorrow. “You okay?” he asked.

“Never better.”

Then she shocked the hell out of him. She closed the distance between them. Reaching up, she grabbed his neck and pulled him down for a helluva kiss, one he didn't want to end. “Now come sit down next to me and enjoy this snack. Tell me more about your work. I'm interested in what you do, Cullen.”

Not sure what to make of any of it, Cullen sat next to her.

“Scotch or wine?”

“Ah, Scotch.”

He took the glass she poured him and sipped, wondering if he was still sleeping. For a minute, it felt as if he'd come home from a hard day's work, his mate waiting for him with welcome and affection.

“Tell me all about woodworking,” she said, taking a square of cheese between her lips.

He answered absently, watching her chew and swallow. She drank wine, and the soft smell of alcohol enhanced the sweetness of her scent. His ears still ringing from the pleasure of her kiss, he tried to will away his arousal and make conversation.

It was some time later, when he was beating his foot in time with the music, that he realized he hadn't stumbled once when talking to her. She seemed genuinely interested in his work, almost more excited from his new acceptance at several folk art galleries than he'd been.

“That's terrific! So they're going to sell select pieces as far away as New York?”

“Yeah.” He flushed with pride, not used to being praised so openly. His mother loved him, and his brothers took great pleasure in teasing him. He knew they liked his work, but they were family.

“Wow. I mean, I love the chairs and carvings you've done at the town center, but I've never seen your more intricate work.”

He cleared his throat. “Would you like to see the crib?”

“After lunch, sure.”

A sudden lull in the conversation unnerved him, because he could almost feel a spike in her energy. She looked nervous as well, further alarming him. He wondered what Sarah really had planned, and if he should heed that warning for caution in his mind. A female predator was always one to be wary of, even his beautiful Sarah.

## Chapter Six

Sarah tried not to fidget as Cullen stared at her through narrowed eyes, alight with gold. Anticipation nearly made her lightheaded. They sat close on the couch before the fire as soft music played in the background. Sarah took another sip of wine while Cullen indulged in Scotch, a label his family kept in their liquor cabinet, which she'd found while snooping earlier today.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine." She put her empty wineglass on the table and took a good, hard look at Cullen.

His dark hair shifted over his eyes, shadowing that gemlike gaze from her. "I don't know. You seem..."

"How? How do I seem?" Sarah took a deep breath. *Go big or go home*, she told herself, and lifted her sweater by the hem, taking it off completely.

He stared at her, his mouth open. He looked gruff, stunned, and sexy as hell.

She stood and shimmied out of her jeans, thankful for the warmth of the nearby fire. Cullen, she noted with amusement, took another long swallow of Scotch and remained seated on the couch. She reached behind her and unclasped her bra. Letting it fall slowly to the ground, she stood before him, clad only in a pair of racy red panties.

"Fuck me," he rasped as he stared.

"Is that what you'd like?" Sarah pulled down her panties and kicked them aside. "You want me to fuck you?"

"Yes. No," he said quickly, breathing hard. "Christ, Sarah. What are you doing?"

She didn't answer him. Instead, she moved the coffee table out of the way and knelt between his legs. She unbuttoned the shirt he wore and spread her hands over his naked chest. Cullen didn't so much as mouth a protest, but leaned his head back against the couch and closed his eyes.

"I must be dreaming," he muttered.

Leaning close, Sarah kissed his firm belly, pleased when it quivered beneath her touch.

The music suddenly stopped, the CD coming to an end. Only the crackle of the fire and Cullen's harsh breathing could be heard, then the snap of his jeans and the steady slide of his zipper as Sarah pushed his pants apart. She stared at the arousal straining his underwear. With careful hands, she pushed the white fabric down, exposing an expanse of Cullen's hard shaft.

Without waiting, Sarah put her lips around him and sucked.

“*Shit.*” Cullen grabbed her head, but didn’t do more than hold his hands in her hair. “Sarah, honey, what are you— *Oh my God.* That feels so good.” He moaned and gently pushed her head down as he thrust up into her mouth.

Sarah had never before given oral sex, though she’d read a ton of books and seen a lot of movies. She wasn’t too proud to say she’d used her time this morning studying a few of his brothers’ adult magazines, looking for tips about how to give a blowjob.

Apparently, she was doing okay, if his groans were anything to go by. What surprised her, however, was that she liked this. She loved the taste of him, so salty, so male. Moisture seeped from his slit, the telltale precome that told her she was definitely doing this right.

Cullen’s penis was hard and thick. She didn’t know how much more of him she might have been able to take, had he allowed her to continue. Instead, he pulled her away from him and stood. Cullen quickly took off his clothes and sat once more, lifting her over him. Straddling his hot body, Sarah lowered herself over his arousal.

Cullen entered her inch by inch, until he was so deep inside her she could feel him everywhere. He stretched her, almost to the point of discomfort. But he didn’t move, allowing her to feel him, to get used to his thick shaft.

“Sarah, baby. *Damn,*” Cullen whispered as he began moving her hips over him. “Ride me. I want to come hard inside you.”

“Yes,” she breathed, groaning when he locked his lips over her breast. He sucked and played while she moved up and down, taking all of him. Thoughts of condoms faded as her bird hushed her concern. *We need Cullen’s seed to bathe our womb, to coat the empty channel long denied a male’s place.* Worries of the consequences paled when he found her other breast, then forced her to kiss him.

When their mouths finally met, it felt as if they exchanged everything. Sarah could feel more than just the physical essence of Cullen inside her. His affection and desire were all there for Sarah to take. But she wanted more. To feel a part of him inside her, to grow together to form a unit, a family.

As if he sensed her needs, he increased her pace and reached a hand between them, putting pressure on her clit with his thumb.

He knew just how to touch her, grinding that pleasure spot with the right amount of pressure. The wild creature living inside of her moaned and pleaded, begging him to finish her.

“Cullen,” she cried as she neared her end. “*Mine.*”

“That’s it. Come all over me,” he breathed. “Squeeze me tight. Let me feel you, Sarah. All of you.”

She shattered in his arms, tensing against him as he stiffened and shouted his release. He was so thick, so big inside of her. This strong, dedicated man who held her so carefully. They remained close, locked in an embrace that felt unreal. Too right to be anything but a dream.

“That was perfect,” Sarah said softly when she could breathe again, running her fingers through his soft hair. “We fit.”

“Hell, yeah,” he said as he moved inside her. “I knew you’d feel this good. Damn, you ’bout killed me.” He sighed and leaned back, closing his eyes. “I don’ t think I ever want to move again.”

She chuckled, pleased to feel him inside of her. And then it hit her. “We didn’t use protection.” Stunned, she didn’t understand how she could have been so thoughtless. Talk about being swept away in the moment.

“It’s okay, shh.” Cullen stroked her back, up and down, his touch light, yet comforting. “Don’t worry about it.”

She sputtered. “Don’t worry about it? What if I get pregnant?”

He groaned and opened his eyes, clenching her waist with hard fingers. He shifted underneath her, withdrawing, only to shock her as he slammed back inside her, his cock hard, as if he hadn’t yet jetted inside her.

“What if you get pregnant?” he rasped. In a lightning-fast move, he flipped her onto her back on the wide couch and began thrusting faster. “What if I fill you with so much come that my seed takes root?”

She moaned, caught in the heat blazing in his gaze. His eagle stared at her through narrowed pupils, watching with satisfaction she could visibly see.

“What if your soft belly grows round with my child?”

Her excitement grew with his, and as he pounded inside her, another sweltering orgasm approached. Cullen deliberately rubbed his pelvis against hers so that with each thrust, he grazed her plump clit.

“Cullen,” she moaned, caressing his chest as he took her. She pinched his nipples, enjoying his response. He swore and fucked her harder.

“Yes. Pinch them and lock your ankles around my back. Let me grind that clit, baby. Let me take you higher, sweep you into my fantasies.”

His murmurs grew more difficult to interpret the harder he thrust. She couldn’t understand more than the pleasure consuming her. Rapture overtook her senses, and with one final shove, he pushed her over the edge.

“Yes,” she cried, her channel gripping him as she saw stars. His scent filled her mind. His touch and taste obliterated any need to look elsewhere for sheer joy.

“Oh, yeah. Dammit, Sarah. That’s so fucking good,” he said as he came.

She blinked up at him, enthralled by the agony on his face as he continued to shove deeper inside her.

“I can’t stop. *Fuck.*”

Totally worn out, Sarah could only lie there as he filled her until he was spent.

She sighed, replete. “That was—”

His kiss interrupted her. The intensity of it stole her breath. When he pulled away, she swore she saw loving affection in his eyes before he shuttered the emotion behind a satisfied grin.

“Any time you want to surprise me with lunch, have at it.” He pulled out of her and left, only to return with a towel he used to clean himself.

When he pressed it between her legs, she blushed. Stupid, considering she was naked with her thighs spread wide. The man had just come inside her, not once, but twice.

“Your tits are so damned fine.” He sighed and leaned down to capture a nipple in his mouth. “Baby, you don’t know how hard it was for me to leave you last night.”

She liked him calling her “baby”. The intimacy enveloped her with acceptance and a deep-seated notion of belonging. Cullen lifted her from the couch and forced her to stand. He lay down before the fire on a woolen rug, then tugged her to lie on top of him.

“Hey, my butt’s getting cold,” she teased.

“That better?” he asked as he covered her ass with his hands.

She folded her arms over his chest and rested her chin on them, content to stare down at him forever. *No, only until the weather lets up*, the practical side of her hastened to ruin the moment. *Remember, Will was loving right after sex, too. Right before you heard about his wife.*

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his eyes narrowed. “Didn’t it feel good?”

She tried to push her emotional baggage behind her, wanting to enjoy sex for once. “Are you kidding? I almost lost my voice crying out so loud.”

Cullen ran his hands over her back before cupping her ass again. “Yeah, you’re a screamer. I like that.”

“Cullen.” She felt her cheeks heat, and not from the fire.

He laughed, full-out amusement that startled her. She’d never seen him so carefree before. “So embarrassed. I keep forgetting you’re new to this.”

“Thanks,” she said dryly, once again reminded of her status as town whore.

He scowled. “Dammit, that’s not what I meant.”

“Well, what did you mean?” She frowned back at him, no longer content to let men toy with her and get away with it.

“Just that you felt so damned right in my arms,” he muttered and glanced away, his cheeks flushed.

“Oh.” She didn’t know what to say to that.

He looked back at her. “Did you mean it?”

“Mean what?” Now what was he talking about? And why couldn’t she think when she looked into his eyes? That golden color mesmerized her.

“You said ‘mine’. Am I, Sarah? Am I yours?”

Embarrassed, she tried to laugh it off. “Cullen, come on.”

“Because I’m yours,” he whispered, planting kisses along her neck, her cheeks, her lips. “As long as you want me.”

Uncomfortable at how much that meant to her, she tried to distance herself from the man and the situation. If Cullen kept looking at her like that, she worried she’d throw herself on his mercy and beg to never leave. A real mistake, because men like Cullen Whitefeather didn’t fall for women like Sarah. They had sex with them and they said pretty words, but when all was said and done, they left without a backward glance.

“Well, if this keeps up, I may never leave,” she teased, expecting him to quickly put the brakes on this deepening attraction. She was therefore confused at the glint of satisfaction in his gaze.

“So you’ll stay for the sex?” He nuzzled her neck, the way his eagle’s beak would stroke her own when they shifted.

“And the incredible food, don’t forget that,” she tried again. “Hell, Cullen, I might have to marry you if you keep that up.” There. That would do it. Nothing made a man disappear faster than talk of marriage. Cullen, however, said nothing. He kissed her again, and then made her forget herself as he took command of her body once more.

Three more wonderful days passed, which Cullen and Sarah spent with each other. Cullen ignored his work, devoting as much time to Sarah as possible. He made sure to keep his desire in check, though it wasn’t easy. They still made love, but not nearly as much as he wanted to. He wanted to show her that he was interested in her as a person.

To his delight, they shared several of the same interests. Good food, suspense novels and horror flicks. Tonight, they watched an action-adventure movie, though he thought Sarah’s attraction to this one had more to do with the man behind the bat suit than the title character. He rubbed his leg against hers and pushed a piece of popcorn between her lips.

The feel of her mouth over his finger shot his libido into overdrive, and his body responded in kind.

“Geez, Cullen.” Sarah pretended to focus on the movie playing on the big-screen TV, but he noted the familiar gleam of desire in her eyes as her gaze shifted toward him. “You’re in perpetual heat. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were a cat.”

“Hell, no.” He still hadn’t forgotten that she’d been attracted to Chastell. Flea-bitten pussy.

“Meow.”

“Funny.” He maintained his scowl, glad that it made her smile. Better her laughter than the wariness she showed each time after they made love. He gave her pleasure, so much so that she cried out in his arms when she splintered into climax. But his little bird wasn’t caving as easily with her emotions.

Cullen saw the faint distrust in her gaze when she glanced at him, and it ate at him. She’d been badly burned before, he knew, but he refused to back down. Now he had her on the run, and the predator within



cried out for pursuit. Besides, if he continued to come as hard as he had inside of her, it was only a short matter of time before he had her pregnant. At the thought, he groaned under his breath. He still couldn't believe she hadn't demanded he use a condom. He knew she wasn't on the Pill, and he hadn't seen a patch on her anywhere. But a wise man knew better than to bring the subject to her attention.

"I can't help what you do to me." He leaned close to kiss her cheek, reveling in her softness. Already his scent melded with hers. He wondered if she realized it, or what that might mean. "You make me so hard all the time."

She squirmed, and he scented her attraction as well. Time to get another taste of that sweet cream, he thought with a grin.

"Bad bird. Concentrate on the movie, okay?" She nodded at the screen.

Cullen ignored her and nipped at her throat, enhancing the mark he'd left just yesterday. She moaned and tried halfheartedly to move away. And then he felt her hand on his crotch.

"Sarah."

At that moment, the phone rang.

"Shit."

Sarah laughed, a girlish giggle, and he stared blankly at her. "Answer the phone, kitty."

"I'll give you a kitty," he grumbled and awkwardly stumbled off the couch toward the cordless handset across the room. "I'm all about eating pussy," he said loudly enough that she heard.

She turned a bright red. He laughed, eager to show her what more he could do with his tongue.

"Yeah?" he barked into the phone, wondering which idiot brother had gotten the short straw tonight. Thankfully, his family hadn't called in a few days, which made him think their visit progressed as it should.

"Cullen?"

"Who the hell do you think it is?" he snarled at his youngest brother, Ian.

"Yeah, I miss you, too."

Cullen sighed. "What's up? I just talked to Micah a few days ago. How's Canada treating you?"

"Ah, about that. Seems we'll be heading home soon. Probably be back in a few days instead of a few weeks."

"Oh?"

"Mom and Micah pissed off the wrong people. Golden Eagles are in high demand up here, and when Micah refused to marry the clan leader's daughter, all hell broke loose."

Cullen snorted. Trust Micah to piss off the wrong people. "Nice. What about Sean? He okay?"

"Actually, he kind of insulted a few members of a visiting bear clan. He's winging his way home as we speak. Mom forced him to leave when he thought about taking on some grizzlies."

Sean was a major pain the ass. Always up for a good fight, he did most of his thinking with his fists instead of his brain. "Great. Well, be glad you missed this last snowfall." *A snowfall that's melting way too*

*fast for comfort. Oh, and by the way, the raptors will probably want my head on a platter for injuring five of their predatory females.*

“Missed this last snowfall? Genius, I’m up here in Canada. It’s not like I’m getting a tan.”

“Dick.”

“Ass.” Ian paused. “Sounds like everything’s good. See you later, then.” He hung up.

Great. His mother and brothers would be back soon. Not only did he have to protect Sarah from outraged raptors who would descend once the weather cleared, but he had to warn her about his odd family as well. They put the “D” in dysfunctional, but hey, they were family.

Letting out the breath he was unaware of holding, Cullen decided to worry about his family later. Right now, he had a movie to watch and a woman to love.

“Everything all right?” she asked as he rejoined her on the couch.

“Fine.” He paused. “I think Sean will be here in the next few days. Remember, he’s the family pain in the ass.”

Silence. Then she said, “I look forward to meeting him.”

He let out a breath. She hadn’t mentioned leaving. “Yeah. Well, just remember I warned you.” He forced his hand to graze hers while they fought for the popcorn in the bowl on her lap. “Feed me, woman.” He directed her hand to his mouth.

“Baby.” Sarah smiled as she said it and pushed a piece of popcorn between his lips.

Cullen sucked her fingertip before she eased it away, but not before he saw the flash of desire in her eyes. That burnt amber gaze drew him time and time again, like looking into golden rays of light as the sun set.

“Salty.” He shook his head and moved the popcorn off her lap. “But I’m in the mood for something sweet.”

“Cullen,” she warned, but her gaze was full of heat. “I haven’t had a chance to see the second movie. I was looking forward to—”

“Screw it. All bats are good for is eating bugs. With those spindly little arms, thin as hell wings and nasty attitudes, they might as well be part of the raptor clan. Now an eagle is something completely different.” He lifted her in his arms and headed for his bedroom. “An eagle kills bothersome pests, like rabbits and mice. We help keep the fish population under control.” He ignored her chuckle. “An eagle cares for his mate. He sees to her needs before his own.”

She grew silent and intent in his arms. His bird could almost feel the animal spirit in her reaching out to him on a higher level. Calling to the one man who would complete the void in her soul.

“His mate?” she asked on a high note.

“Let me show you,” he answered as they entered his room. He kicked the door shut behind him, placed her in the middle of his bed, and stripped. Then he moved forward and started on her clothing, until nothing stood between them.

## Chapter Seven

Sarah waited, her breath drawn, as Cullen slowly descended and joined her in his large bed. The heat from his body warmed her, an inch of space between them before he settled on his side next to her. His gaze traveled over her body from her head to her feet, and then centered on her breasts, where he followed with his hands.

He kept his eyes on her as he played her like an expert, exerting just the right amount of pressure to keep her on edge.

“Cullen,” she gasped when he tweaked her nipple then soothed it with stroking fingers. He toyed with her, running his muscular thigh over hers, intentionally driving her crazy with the feel of his large, hot shaft. He felt firm against her thigh, and she rubbed against him, in hopes of pushing him to enter her, fast and furious. But Cullen refused to be rushed.

His eyes sparkled like rich topaz as he leaned closer and kissed her. “Hmm. So tasty. Sweet, but not what I’ve been waiting for.”

Anticipating the direction of his thoughts, she spread her thighs wider, grazing his cock.

“That’s it. Open nice and wide.”

She groaned and turned her head, seeking his lips. He kissed her and slid his hand down her belly, toying with her newly smooth skin.

“I love how silky you are. No hair to block my lips, my tongue,” he whispered, thrusting his tongue into her mouth while he shoved a finger deep inside her.

Sarah arched into him, wanting more.

“Patience, Sarah. I have a surprise for you tonight.”

“Please,” she gasped, unable to keep still under his plunging hand. He inserted another finger inside her, widening her channel. “I want you inside me.”

He stared into her eyes, and she fell into their depths, wondering how she could feel so much for a man she’d only just met. Her bird felt as if she’d been born just for him, and she wanted him with every fiber of her soul.

“I am inside you.” He flexed his fingers, enforcing his point. “Tell me exactly what you want.”

She couldn’t look away, not even when he began rubbing her clit, inciting her desire to new heights. Desperate to feel him filling her sex, she told him what he wanted to hear, knowing full well how much he

loved hearing her frank talk. The first time he'd made her say such things, he'd lost control. She sincerely hoped he'd lose it soon, because she'd already passed her point of no return.

"I want your cock. Deep inside my pussy. I want you to fuck me. To fill me with your come."

"Fuck. That's it. That's what I'm going to do." His breathing erratic, he turned and hovered over her body, surprising her with this new position. "Suck it, Sarah. Take me down your throat. I want to come hard in your mouth. And when I'm coming, you'll be coming all over my tongue. That sweet cream I need to taste, so bad."

He pushed her legs even wider and clamped his mouth over her clit. He sucked hard, pushing her into a frenzy for more. Her arms trapped beneath his legs, she opened her mouth and sought the tip of his cock.

She found him already moist, his slit filled with desire. She sucked his crown, loving his salty taste, and heard him moan. His attention grew more urgent. Lost in a haze of need, she sucked him deep. He pumped in short thrusts, his girth making it difficult to take all of him inside. But he'd showed her the other day just where he was most sensitive, and she concentrated on the underside of his shaft, just under his crown. Using the light scrape of her teeth and her tongue, she gave him enough suction to make him crazed.

As he devoured her, he added first one, then two fingers, fucking her with an intensity that deepened the harder she worked him.

She felt his climax looming, as if experiencing it herself. Sarah's own crisis neared, her body spiraling out of control. Her tongue delved into his slit and she tasted more cream. His balls drew tight, he was close to the end.

He bore down on her clit, nipping the nub and sucking the sting out of it, and she exploded. Barely aware of her actions, her lips must have tightened with just the right amount of tension, because she was swallowing come while lost in her own orgasm. On and on she pulsed, swallowing loads of Cullen's seed.

When finally they relaxed, Cullen kissed the side of her thigh and withdrew from her mouth. He turned around and flopped next to her on the bed, but not before drawing her into his embrace.

"Oh my God, Sarah." His voice was hoarse. "That was... I can't... Shit. I can't think."

She chuckled, as lost to describe that joining as he. She'd never thought she'd enjoy the taste of a man, but with Cullen, she couldn't imagine not loving him. Going down on him made her feel sexy. A real woman, who could pleasure her man. And though every cautionary bit of her mind told her to maintain a healthy distance, she couldn't. What woman could experience such incredible bliss and not attribute it to clear affection for her partner?

Unfortunately, Sarah wasn't wired for one-night stands. It didn't matter that she'd only known Cullen for a short time. Her animal spirit told her she'd found something special in this raptor. She'd been trying to avoid the truth for some time, but she couldn't any longer. The question, however, was what to do about it.

So she loved—*had feelings*—for Cullen. What now? She still planned to leave Cougar Falls. Would he come with her if she asked him to? Would she ask him to? He hadn't expressed more than a desire for her body. Sure, he'd given her compassion and shelter when she'd needed it, but how far did that affection between *friends* really go?

"Baby, I can't get enough of you," he murmured in that deep voice that made her shiver. "I can't believe how good you make me feel." Cullen shifted his body and drew in a deep breath.

Was he sniffing her hair?

"You smell so good." He chuckled. "Everywhere. I especially like that pussy. I've never tasted anything so fine. I could dine on you for days."

Her face heated, as he most likely knew it would, for he laughed.

"Have I told you how sexy it is to see you blush?"

"Jerk." She socked him in the belly with her free hand not pinned to his side. At an awkward angle, her punch glided off his tight abs.

"Aw, honey. Don't be that way." Cullen snickered.

She loved his laugh. Hell, she loved everything about him, which was why she continued to behave so irrationally. Once again, they'd made love without a condom. Granted, she couldn't get pregnant by swallowing, but she wouldn't have complained if he'd emptied inside her sex. She rationalized that it wasn't the right time for her to get pregnant, and Ac-taw were immune to STDs. But deep down, some stupid part of her wanted his child. *Mine. My mate*, her bird squawked. *Destiny isn't choice*, she tried to caution her animal spirit, but the bird refused to be denied. Just another reason to accept Cullen's seed. It kept her bird happy and herself sane.

Though realistically she knew a happily-ever-after wasn't in the cards, that stupid part of her refused to give up hope that someday she might have a family. Though Cullen hadn't expressed anything more than lust and behaved like a decent human being, he might someday grow to care for her as a mate. But not if she stayed in this town.

In Cougar Falls, Sarah could never be anything but a woman who'd made a horrible mistake. But outside the town, she might find herself. She could grow, be a woman who took risks and made a name for herself. If only she could do it with Cullen by her side...

"A penny for your thoughts," he murmured.

Sarah forced herself to live in the moment. In a few days, life would change. Best to accept that and treasure these days with Cullen. *And who knows? Maybe when I leave, he'll keep in touch. A long-distance friend would be better than no friend...or lover.*

"Sarah?" He sounded concerned. Cullen turned her in his arms, so that they lay on their sides facing each other. "Baby, what's wrong?"

“Nothing a lot more of that won’t cure.” She wound her arms around his neck and licked her lips, pleased when his focus narrowed on her tongue. “Enough talk, more action.”

Cullen didn’t disappoint.

The next night, they lay on his bed together, sweaty and exhausted. Sarah wasn’t sure what had changed, but Cullen now made it plain that he wanted her—several times a day. Whereas before she’d had the feeling he was holding back, now she knew he wasn’t. Perhaps he noticed every dripping icicle and pool of melted snow, the way she did.

Sarah was running out of excuses to stay. The mountain pass wasn’t cleared. The ice might make the road too slippery. Sure she could shift and fly out, but she needed her things. She couldn’t *possibly* leave town without her *things*. A few outfits she’d packed in haste when she’d tried to leave town the first time. Truth be told, Sarah cared less about three pairs of jeans and a few tops than she cared about leaving Cullen.

“You really wore me out,” Cullen said in that low, sexy voice that made her heart do somersaults. He rubbed her belly, his gaze warm and curiously satisfied.

“I think you wore me out.” She ran her hand over his muscular arm, transfixed by the play of muscle beneath her palm. She continued to trail her hand over his forearm until she found his fingers. Entwining her hand in his, she held him close, and her heartstrings pulled tight.

“The snow’s melted,” Cullen said. “You’re going to try to leave me soon, aren’t you?”

To her bemusement, he didn’t sound upset.

“I guess that won’t bother you, will it?” she asked, annoyed, and tried to pry her hand free.

His cool smile faded. “Sarah, stop. You aren’t leaving.”

“Oh? Why? Because sex with you is better than anything I’ve ever had?” Hurt, she sneered at him, demeaning the special time they’d had together. She wanted to slap a hand over her mouth, but she couldn’t stop herself. “You forget, Cullen. I haven’t had that much sex. Maybe the next guy will be—”

He shook his head and gave her a tender smile. She stared at him, stunned. That look in his eyes couldn’t possibly be—

“Sarah, stop. I’m not upset, because you aren’t leaving me. I have to tell you something.” Damned if he didn’t look cute when nervous, but his anxiety only exacerbated hers.

The sudden boom of a door opening, followed by loud voices and louder footsteps, froze them both. The bedroom door flew open and one of Cullen’s brothers asked, “Cullen, what’s that incredible smell...?”

Cullen swore and fought to cover Sarah.

She couldn’t move, shocked at the sudden intrusion into their fantasy life, a world where only Cullen and she existed.

“Hot damn. Little brother finally got lucky.” The handsome male looked like a carbon copy of Cullen, though he stood several inches taller. A near giant.

“This is the pain in the ass.” Cullen sighed and threw on a pair of jeans. “I take it the others are with you?”

“Only Micah. Ian stayed behind with Mom to tie up a few loose ends.” Sean stared over Cullen’s shoulder, his gaze piercing as he studied Sarah. She prayed only her shoulders and beet-red face were visible. “She looks familiar,” he said in a soft voice to Cullen. “Hell. Is this the wallet chick?”

To Sarah’s surprise, Cullen flushed bright red with anger. “Fuck off. This isn’t your business.”

“Micah,” Sean yelled over his shoulder. “Come here.”

“Oh, hell no.” Cullen shoved his brother out the door. “I’ll be right back,” he said to Sarah before following Sean. He closed the door behind him, leaving her more baffled than embarrassed. Wallet chick? What did that mean?

Shaking her head at the untimely interruption, she had to thank his brothers for one thing, at least. She’d known her time with Cullen was drawing near its end. His family confirmed it. No way they’d want Sarah Duncan around their precious brother. Better she hit the road now than go through an awful scene and be kicked out.

She headed into Cullen’s adjoining shower and locked the doors before cleaning up. Once done, she swiftly moved down the hallway into her room and dressed. She was just about to begin packing when a knock sounded at her door.

“Yes?”

The door opened, and another brother peered at her. Micah. He was as tall as Cullen, with piercing, light brown eyes and long, blue-black hair. His face was a study in masculine contours, complete with a straight nose, square jaw and full, firm lips. Thickly lashed eyes saw more than most men, she’d bet, as he searched her for something that made him nod.

“Cullen wants you.” He smiled as he said it, as if realizing the innuendo just then.

“Funny.” She sighed and followed him out the door. Strange, but she didn’t feel as small next to Cullen. Next to Micah, she felt an inch tall.

He studied her as they descended the stairs in silence, until she couldn’t take another step. “What is your prob—”

“About time,” Cullen interrupted and crossed to her side.

Like that, the tension within her eased.

Micah and Sean exchanged a knowing glance, but Sarah didn’t care. Just being next to Cullen made the world seem right again.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know they’d be back so soon.” He put an arm around her shoulders while glaring at his siblings.



“It’s okay, Cullen,” she mumbled, embarrassed at his belligerence. “It’s their house, too. I should probably be leaving anyway—”

“No.” Three male voices said as one, startling her.

“At least wait until tomorrow,” Cullen urged, soothing her with his touch. He kissed her on the cheek and guided her back toward the stairs. “Let me deal with these knuckleheads, and I’ll rejoin you. How about a glass of wine?”

Sarah considered the concern in Cullen’s soft brown eyes. The big guy looked worried, and she slowly realized that it had nothing to do with his brothers seeing them together. He was afraid she’d leave him without a good-bye. Relieved, she relaxed and teased him. “Handling me with kid gloves, eh? Your brothers must really be a handful.”

Cullen sighed while his brothers laughed. “You have no idea.”

“I wouldn’t mind a glass, provided we can all drink it together down here.” A small test, just to make sure he wasn’t embarrassed of her.

“Sure.” Cullen smiled, his grin so wide it took her breath away. “Be right back.”

“Oh, and I’ll have a beer,” Sean yelled. He shook his head. “Poor manners, but what can you expect from a middle child?”

“Aren’t you a middle child as well?” Sarah asked, intrigued by Cullen’s brothers. They all looked so much alike, yet she could already sense their differences. Between Cullen’s descriptions and seeing the Whitefeathers in action, she could clearly see Micah’s authority and sobriety staring out from those proud features, as well as Sean’s mischievous flare for trouble.

He winked at her and flashed a grin. “Honey, there’s nothing middle or average about me. I’m the oldest of the second three, and Momma’s youngest before Cullen was accidentally conceived.”

“Jackass.” Cullen returned with a beer in one hand and a glass of wine for Sarah in the other. “Don’t listen to him. I was *planned*.”

Micah smirked. “You keep thinking that, kid. Sean, go get us a beer. And don’t whine,” he said, cutting off Sean in mid-complaint. “So, Sarah, how’d you and Cullen meet?”

Sarah blinked at the change in subject, but let Cullen seat them on the couch. After taking a sip of wine, she answered. “I work, or used to work, at the Fox’s Henhouse. I’ve seen Cullen on and off for the past six months.” She smiled at the man she’d fallen hard for, aware of him on every level. *I’m really gonna miss him*. “Coffee with every visit.”

“I see.” Micah caught the beer Sean tossed at him, opened it and took a swig, his eyes fixed to Cullen’s face.

“I’ve never seen you or your other family there,” Sarah asked, curious. “Why’s that?”

Sean snorted. “We can’t stand the raptor clan. No offense, but they’re a bunch of assholes.”

"I can't argue with that," she said dryly. "Why didn't you leave with the rest of the eagle clan when they left a year ago?"

Sean and Micah glared at Cullen. "Good question," Sean said.

Cullen refused to look at her, focused on his beer.

"Cullen?" she asked.

"I like it here." He sounded defensive. "I like our house, this land."

"And?" Sean prodded, his gaze intense.

"And I like the area," Cullen muttered.

She stroked his arm, pleasantly surprised when he caught and held onto her hand.

Micah stared at their hands and raised a brow. "We just visited up north, and believe it or not, Cullen's got the right of it. Canada wouldn't have suited us, not as the current clan now sits."

"I'm sorry." But Sarah wasn't, not really. Why it should matter where Cullen went or didn't go shouldn't matter. Not when she still had plans to leave.

"I'm not." Cullen swore. "The raptors may need guidance, but the eagles are bloodthirsty birds. Talk about fickle." He blew out a breath. "It's a good thing our family was high up on the food chain. We made sure others took care of the weaker ones."

"The new eagle regime isn't so concerned," Sean admitted.

"A lot like the jackasses currently in charge here." Micah glared at Sarah. "How do you stand Larsen, Shaw and Farley?"

"Don't ask me. I never voted for any of them. It's a blood thing."

"Come again?" Micah asked.

"Their fathers and their fathers and so on were clan leaders. They've been passing on tradition through bloodlines."

"No shit." Micah shook his head. "I knew I should have paid better attention to Mom and that raptor history lesson. I didn't connect Larsen and Shaw with the prior clan leaders. Maternal lines, right?"

"Yeah." Which should have meant females in the clan held more rights. Or so Sarah and her mother had often lamented.

"So why don't you like them much?" Sean asked.

Cullen squeezed her hand. "Rumors stuck her in a bad place. The assholes had the nerve to cheat on their mates and blame Sarah for inciting them."

She could feel his anger like a palpable force.

"Cullen," she said, trying to dissuade him from sharing her shameful history.

"That dickhead Shaw messed her up. He's got it coming, and damned if I'm not going to give it to him."

Worried, Sarah ignored his brothers and turned to Cullen. She set her wine down and faced him. “You can’t go up against the council. They don’t like problems. And after what happened the other day, they could very well throw you out of the clan.”

“What happened the other day?” Micah asked in a harsh voice. “Cullen, explain.”

Cullen glared at Sarah, then at Micah. “I don’t answer to you.”

“No, you answer to me,” a deep female voice said from the kitchen. A petite woman with daggers for eyes strode through with her hands on her hips. “Cullen Whitefeather, what the hell did you do?”

## Chapter Eight

Cullen wanted to sink through the floor. Bad enough manic Micah and Sean, the family clown, were here. Now his mother had arrived, no doubt with Ian in tow. *Dammit*. He'd been doing so well with Sarah, too. Now, because his family couldn't get along with anyone outside their small family, they'd arrived home early, just in time to scare Sarah gone for good.

He glanced at her, praying she could read his eyes that said, "have patience, please," and explained what had happened between Sarah and the raptors days ago.

His family—ah, there was Ian, the *baby*, just over her shoulder—stood in silence for a minute before everyone erupted.

"That's bullshit."

"Five against one. Cowards."

"I can't stand Larsen," Ian added. "And I really hate his mate. She's got more hands than an octopus." Which put his mother into a tizzy.

Sheila Whitefeather shouted and swore louder than her sons. Cullen refused to let go of Sarah's hand, afraid the noise would send her flying into the next county. But a look at her showed her captivated by the high drama.

Eventually his family calmed. He answered his mother's questions in yes and no answers. Until Sheila turned her ice blue eyes on Sarah. *Fuck*.

"Well, girl, don't you have anything to say? You planning to make my boy do your battling for you?"

All eyes turned to Sarah, who fidgeted next to him.

"I'm very grateful to Cullen for his help. Without him I'd be dead, I'm sure. But no, I don't plan on letting him take the fall for me," she said, directing her comment to him. "I'm capable of standing up for myself, but I don't see the need. I'm not sticking around this godforsaken town any longer than I have to," she ended in a hard voice.

His heart cracked, wishing he'd had more time to convince her to take a chance on him. He couldn't explain it, but he knew in his heart his place was in Cougar Falls. Right next to Sarah.

His mother feigned surprise, and Sean smiled wide. *Hell. What were they up to now?* "Are you telling me you've been toying with my son's affections?"

"Huh?" Sarah stared at his mother, confusion darkening her eyes.

"You slept with him, didn't you?"

“Momma, really,” Cullen interrupted, his cheeks hot. His brothers’ laughter wasn’t helping matters.

“Momma, nothing. Did this woman sleep with you or didn’t she?”

“I did,” Sarah said stiffly. “Not that it’s any of your business. What’s between Cullen and me is personal.”

“He came outta my belly, honey. It doesn’t get much more personal than that,” Sheila snarled.

Sarah choked, and Cullen wanted to strangle his mother.

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Sarah threw up her hands and stood, facing his small clan. “You should be glad I’m leaving. I’m Sarah Duncan. The town whore.”

“Sarah!”

“No, Cullen. Your mother wants to know, so I’ll tell her.” Sarah’s cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright with anger. Cullen empathized with how difficult this must be for her, but at the same time, he couldn’t stop himself from admiring her passion. His eagle fluttered inside his breast, aching with the need to possess this challenging female.

His mother’s eyes narrowed between him and Sarah, an odd expression on her face.

“I made the mistake of falling for a spineless jerk,” Sarah spoke plainly, her hands on her hips. “Three days after telling me he loved me, he announced to the world that he’d married some bright-eyed dodo from Kansas. Call me crazy, but falling for a line shouldn’t make me a slut.”

“No indeed.”

Sarah didn’t seem to hear his mother as she raged. “Then the dickhead had the audacity to tell his buddies he’d gotten into my pants. And *I’m* the one at fault. As if that weren’t all, his friends continue to bother me to this day. One of the raptor clan leaders keeps trying to sleep with me, and his bitch of a wife nearly killed me. Not one of my clan brothers or sisters stuck by me. The only friends I have are a silver fox and a bear, and I’m not sure if the bear counts, because Mac’s my boss. I’m sick of living this life, sick of being everybody’s punching bag. So if you don’t like the truth, lady, you can kiss my ass!” Sarah ended in a yell, her eyes slitted, her body poised on the verge of a shift as her animal spirit struggled to break free, caught in her anger.

Cullen could only stare at his mate, feeling her pain, her rage. But more, he felt sheer admiration for the strength it must have taken to put up with so much by herself for so long. What had she said? That she’d lost her mother years ago? She’d been living on her own for eight long years. Hell, she needed him. Him and his family. And if his mother refused to stand by his mate, Cullen would simply leave.

“Momma,” he began, only to be cut off.

“Kiss your ass, huh?” Sheila laughed so hard she fell back on the seat behind her. “Girl, you’ve got a fire in there. No wonder my Cullen’s fallen hard for you.”

“Jesus, Momma.” Cullen slapped a hand over his face.

“Quiet, boy. Can’t you see, this is what you’ve been missing for way too long.”

“He knows,” Micah said. “She’s the wallet chick.”

“Oh-ho. So this is the one.” Sheila stood and approached Sarah, who looked as if she didn’t know whether to stay or to go. “She’s pretty, built for breeding, and has a strong animal spirit. How’s her bird?”

“Her eagle’s as big as mine,” Cullen announced with pride. He just hoped to hell Sarah would forget about the wallet chick comment. His crush was embarrassing.

“Golden?” Golden eagle, his mother meant.

“Yeah.” Cullen pulled Sarah against him and hugged her tense frame. “Fierce thing. She stood strong against five raptors until I got to her. Survived a mauling.”

“Nice.” Ian whistled and turned to Sarah. “So, you breeding yet?”

“*What?*” Sarah coughed for several moments until she wheezed, “Breeding? Cullen and I have known each other for a while, but I just started... I mean, we haven’t really known each other that well for that long.”

“Uh-huh.” Sheila grinned, then pulled Sarah out of Cullen’s grasp. “So, when’s the wedding?”

Thoroughly disgusted with his family, Cullen tugged Sarah out of his mother’s clutches, wishing this didn’t seem so much like a tug-of-war gone crazy. He nudged her ahead of him toward the stairs. “Good night,” he yelled over his shoulder. “And good riddance.”

Ignoring the hoots and guffaws behind him, he pushed Sarah up the stairs and down the hall into her bedroom, then locked the door behind him. He turned to see her staring at him in shock.

He sighed. “I’m sorry, honey. I warned you my family was tough. Please don’t leave on account of them.”

He held his breath, praying she’d stay another day.

“I, ah, I don’t know what to say, Cullen. I’m sorry, I guess.” She flopped down onto his bed and lay back, covering her face with her hand. “Oh, God. I told your mother I was the town whore. I told her to kiss my ass!”

Cullen grinned. “Yeah, you did. Nice. She liked that.”

“She did?” Sarah moved her hand to gawk at him.

“My mother respects strength. And you’re stronger than any woman I’ve ever known, save my mother.” Just another reason he knew they’d suit. “Hell, any woman who can tolerate my family for more than three minutes at a time should be canonized.”

Sarah chuckled. “They’re that bad, aren’t they?”

Relieved she saw the humor in it, he lay down with her. “I told you so’ seems a little late, hmm?”

She started laughing, and he joined her. When they finally settled down, he pulled her into his arms.

“Stay for a few more days, okay, Sarah? I know you still want to leave, but would you humor me?”

She turned in his arms and traced his face with her gaze. “Why?” she asked softly. “Why do you want me to stay?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to confess his love, but Cullen suddenly grew tongue-tied. God, she was so beautiful. So out of his league. Micah or Sean would have had her reduced to nothing but “yes” by now, and Cullen could barely breathe for want of loving her.

“Cullen?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

Unable to answer with words, he embraced her and showed her how much he loved her, hoping once more that his seed took root. Because no matter what tomorrow brought, he couldn’t let Sarah go.

Sarah woke the next morning feeling out of sorts. Cullen lay beside her, one large arm trapping her to the bed. She scooted out from under him, amused by his mumbled protest, and took a quick shower. Unfortunately, she’d forgotten to lock the side door.

“Well, well, what little birdie flew into my shower?” Sean’s voice sounded way too near. Though most Ac-taw felt little modesty, Sarah had been taught long ago that circumspection was key.

“Sorry. Um, could you wait outside while I finish?”

“Not shy, are you?” When the rippled glass door of the shower moved, she latched onto it like a lifeline, keeping it closed.

“Would you please get out of here?”

“You know, I can see more than a vague outline of your shape through the door. No wonder Cullen’s so in love.”

She lit up at the thought. Cullen? In love with her? If only. “Very funny. Now get out before I tell your mamma you were hitting on Cullen’s girl.”

He vanished before she could add another threat. To her relief, he didn’t reappear. She quickly left the shower, *locked the door*, and dried off. Once dressed, she left her room and Cullen still sleeping soundlessly in her bed.

He’d had a long night. After they’d made love, he left her to talk to his family again, knowing they would have questions they wouldn’t wait to have answered. She’d fallen asleep alone and woken with him there.

He felt so right next to her. As if they belonged together. Yearnings grew, and she wondered why even the thought of living with his crazy family didn’t put her off. Maybe it was seeing the clear love flowing between them. For all their loud flaws, the Whitefeathers clearly loved one another.

“Good morning,” Sheila said as Sarah entered the kitchen. They were alone, to Sarah’s relief.

Sheila stared at Sarah, then at the empty coffee pot, and back at Sarah again.

Sighing and unable to stifle a grin, Sarah made a pot, needing it for strength.

“I’ve seen you at the Fox’s Henhouse.”

The statement surprised Sarah. “Really? I don’t remember seeing you there.”

Sheila shrugged. "I've been by a few times, mostly when you were swamped with customers. I like Mac. He runs a decent diner. Damned good waffles."

"The best." Sarah smiled. "It surprised me to find Cullen such a good cook. He won't let me cook while I'm here, but I have to say I'm nowhere near as good as he is with a skillet."

Sheila beamed. "My boy loves to cook. Takes after me."

"I still don't understand why he came in to eat all the time." *Unless it was to get away from his brothers.*

"Don't you?" Sheila asked, her gaze direct. "My boys know their hearts. They're all different, mind you. Micah goes after what he wants. Sean plays around too much, and Ian's too focused on business. 'Bout drives me nuts with his spreadsheets." Sheila grimaced. "But Cullen...that boy's the spittin' image of his daddy. Shy as a sparrow. Can barely put two words together when he's wanting something."

Sarah blinked, not sure she was hearing right. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Sheila nodded. "Took me a while to understand why he spent so much damned time in town when we all hate it there."

"But, but he never—"

"Never what?" Cullen asked as he entered the kitchen, his eyes still sleepy, his hair ruffled. He looked absolutely perfect to Sarah.

Could it be true? Had Cullen really liked her for so long?

"Hell, Momma. What are you saying now?" He kissed Sarah on the mouth, as if they'd been doing so for years, and whipped out a flat of bacon from the refrigerator.

Sheila smirked as if to say, "I told you so."

Thrilled, scared and in a state of disbelief, Sarah needed some time to herself.

"You know, I should probably check on my place, just to make sure everything's okay. I haven't been back since the storm hit days ago." She refused to look at Cullen, knowing if she did, she might not leave. *Ever.* "I'll be back soon." She darted outside onto the deck and ripped off her shirt and bra as she shifted.

Her pants caught on her talons, as she'd known they would, but she shrugged them away as she flew into the sky.

Wanting to believe so badly in Cullen tore at her sense. She had plans to leave Cougar Falls. Falling in love with Cullen Whitefeather hadn't been on her to-do list. Packing and checking out, that was all. Until Jenny Larsen intruded. *Oh, hell. I can't leave until I square things with the Larsens and clan leaders. I can't leave my mess on Cullen's shoulders.*

The thought of leaving physically hurt. If only she could trust what Sheila said as truth. Why wouldn't Cullen say something about how he felt? Unlike Will, Cullen would mean what he said. He didn't throw words around. Aside from those few references to eagles and their mates, he'd never once told her he loved



her. *Though he'd shown her in a lot of ways*, her bird slyly reminded her. Caring for her, tending to her, physically loving her with no thoughts except for making her feel good.

Hell, they'd only really known each other for a week. Those instances in town meant next to nothing. Serving a man coffee didn't mean they knew anything about each other.

Except she knew his favorite color was yellow. He hated salmon but loved perch. He'd take Jason over Freddy any day of the week, and he had a thing for her lips, especially when she pressed them against his own.

Sarah sighed and dove through the air, her cabin in mind. No matter how she looked at it, both she and her bird were in love. She couldn't, in good conscience, leave Cullen until she'd sorted this emotional mess out with him. She owed it to herself.

And if Cullen truly loved her, he'd leave with her.

*And leave his family? His business? Yeah, that's fair, Sarah. Force him to choose between you and his family.*

Another no-win situation, she realized. Because even if Cullen did love her, there was no way she'd stay in this town with the raptor clan. Not with the way the town perceived her.

She circled over her cabin, suddenly in sight, and landed easily. Shifting back into her human form, she hurried inside, only to find her house trashed. As she dressed in a pair of ripped sweats, her anger grew...until she saw the note tacked to the back of her front door.

*If you want Cullen Whitefeather to remain in the clan, leave town and don't ever come back. His status as a town citizen depends on you to do the right thing. And if he's kicked out, it's a sure thing the family business will fall as well. You tell anyone about this, and we'll make sure the Whitefeathers are out of Cougar Falls faster than the crow flies.*

Sarah's jaw dropped. She'd expected trouble for Cullen, but not this kind. If he was expelled from the clan, he'd have to leave town. He had a family here, a business, a place in Ac-taw society. Sarah had nothing. Nothing but Cullen, and that was iffy at best. Her leaving wouldn't impact anyone but Mac, and he could get another waitress at the drop of a hat.

Not only that, the note implied that Cullen's family would be at risk as well. No matter that none of them deserved it. Jenny Larsen and her friends had just that kind of pull in the community. As tough as Sheila liked to think she was, she needed steady clients to run a business in a town as small as Cougar Falls. Cullen's contributions to several art galleries notwithstanding, the family as a whole could only exist so long as the clan accepted them.

Did Sarah have the right to deny them their life in Cougar Falls? This mess was hers in the first place. Jenny Larsen had been after her, not Cullen.

Handsome, honorable, talented Cullen.

She contemplated her situation for hours, torn by the possibility of happiness just within reach. But at what cost?

Heartbroken, Sarah knew what she needed to do. As much as she hated the thought of leaving Cullen, she'd do it for his own good. *Besides, he never said he loved me*, she told herself. *That was supposition on his mother's part. So how can I sever ties to something that never was? As if a man like Cullen could ever love someone like me.*

Wiping hated tears from her cheeks, she packed what little of her things remained intact and headed into town to say her good-byes.

## Chapter Nine

Cullen wanted to put his fist through the wall when he saw the destruction in Sarah's house.

"Damn, bro. Your chick doesn't have a thing for cleanliness, does she?"

"Fuck off, Sean."

Sean huffed. "Come on, Cullen. She's fine. Mom followed her into town, and yes, she's keeping her distance. Sarah doesn't know she has a shadow. But she has a suitcase, man. Open your eyes, Cullen. She's leaving."

Cullen couldn't handle much more. Whatever his mother had said to Sarah had thoroughly spooked her. His family had done what he feared and driven her away. Then to find Sarah's place trashed, her furniture scarred by talons and covered with feathers, the words "slut" and "whore" painted throughout her home... He was livid.

"Jenny Larsen's going to pay for this." He'd murder her and her husband. No one fucked with his mate. Not anymore.

"Now, Cullen," Sean started, looking worried for the first time since they'd landed. "You don't know who's behind this."

"Bullshit! You can smell her, can't you?"

Sean sighed. "Yeah, I can. But you have to think straight. You can't just barge into a clan leader's home and— Damn it, Cullen! Wait up."

Sean shifted and followed Cullen, already in the air and heading for raptor clan central. No matter how many feathers he had to ruffle, he'd make sure Sarah could hold her head high in this fucking town once and for all.

Sarah hugged Mac and left before his dry-eyed sorrow caused another round of tears. God, she didn't have many fond memories of Cougar Falls. So why was it so hard for her to leave the damned place?

Cullen Whitefeather.

She sniffed and ran into a broad chest.

"Whoa there. Sarah?" Sherriff Ty Roderick stared down at her in concern. The silver fox gently took her by the shoulders and edged her away from prying eyes. He pulled her into an alleyway and dried her eyes with a handkerchief he pulled from the back pocket of his jeans. "Honey, are you okay?"

The sincerity of his concern made her cry harder.

“Those damned raptors. Want me to shoot anyone in particular?”

She choked on a laugh, understanding what her friend Julia saw in this man. He was handsome, as most of the Ac-taw were. Broad shoulders, slim hips, and piercing gray eyes that could look right through you made a body think twice about crossing him. When shifted, his fox was slight, but fast as a whip and as mean as a grizzly. Silver foxes were known for their quickness of thought, and Ty was one of their best.

“I’m fine. Just saying goodbye. It’s harder than I thought it would be.”

Ty nodded and tipped his hat back with one finger. He looked like a modern-day cowboy—sexy, rough, and ready. She mentally agreed with Julia. He truly was a *fox*. And nice as well.

“Well, you take care, Miss Sarah. Any time you need anything, anything at all, you let me know. And if you need a place to stay out there in the big bad world, I can help you with that, too.”

She saw the understanding in his eyes. As the sheriff, Ty knew what went on in town. He’d never condoned bullying, and he’d gone out of his way to put a stop to it, even in her case. Odd, she hadn’t thought about him much when she’d considered leaving. Nor had she thought about Millie at the ice-cream parlor, or Harry at the bakery. Then there was Sophie at the grocery, a newly arrived gray wolf not much more welcomed in town than Sarah. They might have become good friends.

A few more people than she’d thought who might actually miss her when she was gone. How about that?

“Thanks, Ty. I really appreciate that.” She sniffed then figured, what the hell? “You know, Julia’s in quite a mess out west.”

He stiffened. “What’s that?”

“She didn’t want me to tell anyone, but all those trips of hers to and from town... I think she might have more trouble than she can handle. She’s trying to help her sisters out, but I think a pack of hunters might have found her.”

“What the hell is that idiot thinking? Hunters?” he snarled. “*Shit. Damn it.*” Apparently realizing he was swearing like a sailor in front of a female, Ty rubbed two hands over his face in disgust. “Sorry, Sarah. But thanks for the tip. You make sure to check in when you get where you’re going. I don’t want to have to worry about two pretty females alone and on their own.”

Ty left her in the alley, swearing under his breath as he strode into the street, in the opposite direction of where he’d been headed before she’d run into him.

Before she could take another step, a familiar voice ordered her to turn around.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” Sheila Whitefeather demanded, her arms crossed over her chest. “You going to break my son’s heart and leave town, just like that?”

Just what Sarah didn’t need—a loud-mouthed woman about to ruin her chances to set things right.

“That’s right, lady. Your son was fun, but now it’s time to go.” Her heart broke at the thought of never seeing Cullen again. Or worse, of him hating her. But at least he’d still have a place in town. “I have better things to do than hang around *a pussy* who can’t tell a woman what he’s feeling.”

That had to do it. She’d called Sheila’s son the worst kind of insult. A feline or female body part. Nothing worse than demoralizing a male to his mother.

“Well said.”

Sarah shook her head. “*What?*”

“Well said. Now what are you going to do about it? Let him get away with that?”

“But, I—you can’t... I’m leaving.” Sarah turned to go, but not before Sheila grabbed hold of her and swung her around.

The eagle shoved a note in Sarah’s face. The same threatening letter Sarah had hours ago crumpled and tossed into her waste bin.

Sheila gentled her voice. “You’ve got to do better than that if you want to scare away a Whitefeather.”

Sarah couldn’t help the tears that filled her eyes. “He’s a good-for-nothing raptor. A man with sex on the brain. Doesn’t know a thing about romance. Can’t say much without screwing it up.”

She cried, wishing things had been different. She’d give anything to try her new life with Cullen. Hell, she’d even consider staying here if she could spend the rest of her life with that man. Her bird cried similar tears, missing him so damned much.

Sheila held out her arms and engulfed Sarah in a motherly hug. The soft body and feminine scent made Sarah long for her mother, wishing for days long past.

“I’m sorry,” she said through sniffles. “I can’t let them hurt him. I won’t. Not for me.”

“Well, now. I don’t think that’s up to you anymore.” Sheila patted her back, holding her close and rocking her, the way her mother used to. “Oh, Sarah. You’ve been on your own so long you don’t know how to ask for help. Lucky for you, we golden eagles stick together.”

Sarah looked up from Sheila’s shoulder into clear acceptance. “No.” She struggled to get free, but Sheila had surprising strength on her side. “I can’t let you do this.”

“You can’t *let me* do anything. I do it, it’s done.” Sheila grinned, and fierce eagle eyes met her own. “Honey, the Larsens don’t scare me. And neither do town politics. We Whitefeathers have lived in Cougar Falls since before the town had a name. The Salish Indians met our people, the Ac-taw, and promised to share the land, a land that was neither theirs nor ours. The town can put all the rules in place that they want, but no one and nothing is going to force me or my boys from our rightful home.”

Sheila wiped her tears. “Now gear up for the fight of your life. We’re going to bust into tonight’s clan meeting with an agenda of our own. That is, if you think you have something to fight for?”

Taking a deep breath, Sarah sought for calm, and that hidden well of strength that had given her the courage to ignore the Shaws and the Larsens for so long. “I won’t let you or Cullen fall prey to Larsen and that filth. It’s time I fixed something that’s been bothering me for a long time.”

“Amen, girl. Let’s get to it. I have a few ideas of my own. Let’s take a run over by the attorney’s office. Gerald owes me a favor or two.”

Cullen pounded Mike Shaw into the dirt. The man would be lucky to stand tomorrow, if he could walk within the next week. Rob Jenkins hadn’t fared too well in their small skirmish either. Both of his eyes had swelled up like balloons, and he’d spit out several teeth onto the bloody ground next to Mike.

“Two down, a few Larsens to go.”

Sean chuckled and walked with him toward clan central. On their way, Cullen passed Burke Chastell.

“You’re an asshole,” he said, glaring at the male. He still couldn’t believe Sarah had ever had a thing for the dumb cat, especially since the Shifter didn’t have the first clue about who Sarah really was.

Chastell straightened. “Excuse me?”

His wife walked out in front of him, pushing against his chest with one hand, forcing him to stop his advance on Cullen. “Cullen Whitefeather, right?”

“Yeah?” How did she know his name?

“You Whitefeathers decide you need a better place to roost, you look us up. I like what you did to Shaw’s face. We could use another decorator in the pride.”

Cullen grunted, liking Rachel a helluva lot more than her asshole husband. The pussy. “I’ll think about it. Have to talk to Sarah first.” Burke groaned and looked up at the sky. “Mike’s a loud-mouthed idiot. There, I’ve said it *again*. I’m sorry I ever listened to the rumors he spread.” He glanced at his wife. “I’m never going to hear the end of this, am I?”

“No, you’re not,” Rachel snapped. She turned back to Cullen. “Sarah’s at the clan meeting. Tell her I said hey. And if she needs any help dealing with Jenny Larsen, to give me a call.”

“She won’t need any help, but thanks.”

As he left, he heard Rachel say, “I like him, Burke. And he’s almost as good-looking as you are.” Which had the cat in an uproar, threatening to dismember Cullen and his entire family.

“Possessive breed, those catamounts,” Sean murmured. He surprised Cullen, who’d almost forgotten he was there.

“Assholes.”

“I don’t know. I like Grady, Burke’s younger brother. He’s fun to have around when you want to screw with the wolves. No love lost there, which makes you wonder what Monty, that damned gray wolf, is doing as part of their pride.”

“Whatever.” Cullen didn’t care to make small talk. He wanted to hurt some raptors. Will Shaw and Dennis Larsen in particular. “What time is it?”

“Time to interrupt a clan meeting, I’m thinking,” Sean said with a smirk in his voice.

“Damn straight.” Cullen charged past several silver foxes and a handful of raptor teens.

“Don’t look now, but I guarantee they’ll be expecting us,” Sean said. Overhead, several harriers flew like mad toward clan central.

“Good. The more the merrier,” Cullen snarled, remembering all too clearly Sarah’s beat-up cabin.

“Just remember to keep a clear head.”

Cullen was through listening to Sean. He picked up his pace, jogging toward the meeting. However, when he entered the large meeting hall, big enough to house a football field and then some, he found a multitude of surprises. Standing at the side of the gathering, like many of the other raptors, he had a full view of the center dais, upon which the clan leaders convened. But the raptors who should have been there weren’t, at least not where they usually sat.

A representative from every clan in Cougar Falls sat upon the raised dais, in lieu of the regular clan officers. In front of the dais in one grouping stood his mother, *Sarah*, Micah and Ian. Directly across from them stood the Shaws and the Larsens, as well as the other females who’d attacked Sarah.

“Speaking of Grady,” Sean murmured, and waved at his friend.

Grady Chastell, apparently sitting in for the catamounts, rolled his eyes and nodded at the mess around them. Cullen recognized Gerald Winters of the silver foxes, Rafe Sheridan of the gray wolves, Linda Rawlins and Rick Farley for the raptors, and Thomas Stovall representing the bear clan. A fair assortment of Ac-taw, each of whom had a reputation as fair and intolerant of abuse, with the exception of Farley and his questionable affiliation with the Larsens.

“What the hell’s going on?” He concentrated on Sarah, his mate, who looked extremely nervous. A fierce need to comfort her struck him, and it took Sean’s considerable strength to hold him back.

“Wait and watch. Momma’s always got a plan. Just let it play out.”

Linda cleared her voice and rapped a gavel, and the low murmuring in the growing crowd subsided. “Please continue, Mrs. Whitefeather. Why exactly are you here?”

“I’m here because I’m sick and tired of the crap going on in my new clan. Had I known what a bunch of assholes you really were, I’d have taken myself and my boys into eagle country up north.”

Noise erupted around the large hall. Several of the non-raptor clan members openly grinned, while Larsen and the asses with him protested loudly. A few of Jenkins’ family, as well as Shaw’s buddies and Pat’s crowd, backed up the clan leaders in question.

“That is not the way we address the council,” Dennis Larsen sputtered.

“No, it’s not,” Farley said from the dais.

“Can it, Farley. Everyone knows you and Dennis are thick as thieves,” Sarah added with contempt.

Noise around the hall quieted, the crowd stunned to hear mild-mannered Sarah Duncan speaking so boldly.

“I’m here because I’m embarrassed at what my clan has become. When my mother died, very few of my *brothers and sisters* stepped in to help a lonely girl adjust. I found more compassion from the bears and silver foxes.”

Stovall grunted his satisfaction. Though the bears were a rough crowd, they always took care of their own, as well as a few strays here and there.

“My problem, however, has more to do with the way our clan leaders abuse their authority. So, in accordance with town law, I’m inclined to ask the panel to launch a full-scale investigation into the impropriety enacted by Jennifer and Dennis Larsen, as well as William Shaw.”

Jaws dropped.

“What the hell?” Cullen didn’t understand the significance of what Sarah was doing, but the smirk on Gerald Winters’ face, town attorney, made him wonder how much Gerald had helped Sarah.

“That’s bullshit,” Dennis Larsen yelled and took a step toward Sarah. “You can’t do that! This is raptor business. None of the other clans should even be here.”

“Not true.” Gerald cleared his throat, the sharp eyes of the fox full of speculation when they fell on Larsen. “When the town was created, our forefathers drafted a rough constitution. Cougar Falls is a living testament to who and what we are, and it protects Shifters as a matter of course. But should any member, and specifically a citizen with clan leader status, bring harm and discontent to his or her people, this law was put in place to disabuse such injustice. Plus, it prevents a lot of unnecessary bloodshed.”

“I don’t know about unnecessary,” Micah said in a loud voice, earning him major points with Cullen.

“Calm down, Micah,” Gerald said. “We’re here to determine if there’s any basis to what Sarah and the Whitefeathers are accusing.”

“There sure as hell is.” Cullen shook off his brother’s arm and approached his family. “I witnessed five raptors challenging *one* to an illegal duel. Jenny Larsen led the pack and would have killed Sarah had I not intervened.”

The noise level in the crowd swelled. Around them, more and more raptors entered the hall, until it was standing room only around the panel of accusers and accusees.

“Everyone, shut the hell up!” Grady roared, then sat back in his chair. “So help me, the next bird who squawks out of order is going to be lunch.”

You could hear a pin drop in the hall.

“Well said, cat.” Stovall grinned, showing bright white fangs.

Linda rolled her eyes. “We’re all predators here, gentlemen. So if we could get on with the proceedings? Cullen Whitefeather, you have something to add?”

Cullen quickly explained what he’d seen, and how much damage Sarah had taken.



“Sarah, come here.” Linda motioned for Sarah to approach.

Sarah walked around to the back of the dais, and the clan representatives left their seats to gather around her.

“Do I have to?” Sarah asked in a soft voice, one he was attuned to hearing.

“I’m sorry, dear. It’s necessary,” Linda answered.

Cullen suddenly understood why she hesitated.

“Show them,” he encouraged, pleased when she peeked over Linda’s shoulder at him and scowled.

After a moment, the clan reps dispersed, and Sarah returned to her position within the Whitefeather fold. Cullen moved to stand protectively between her and the Larsens.

“There’s another scar along my sternum,” Sarah informed them.

“After a week, it’s yet to heal. That was some fight.” Farley surprised them all by glaring at the Larsen group. “You know the rules were put in place to keep us from killing ourselves as a whole. Hell, Jenny. You want to take on Sarah, why not challenge her full-on, the legal way?”

“Because she didn’t want my name linked with hers,” Sarah answered. “The reason Jenny and her idiot friends came after me had to do with her unfaithful mate. Dennis Larsen cheats on her as much as Will Shaw cheats on his own wife. Both men are in complete violation of the raptor code of conduct.”

Farley sputtered. “That’s just rumors, Sarah. You of all people know not to listen to those.”

“Come off it, Farley, even I’ve seen Larsen getting it on outside of town,” Grady said with a huff. “I thought you raptors mate for life?”

“We do.” Farley suddenly took on the full force of his animal spirit. The older man’s rage was clear, much to Cullen’s surprise. He hadn’t thought Farley would separate from Larsen, but then, how much did he really know about these people? He looked at the Mike Shaws and Rob Jenkins types and made assumptions, just as the clan had made incorrect assumptions about Sarah.

“I think we have enough to merit an investigation into the events here, at least into Dennis Larsen’s ability to lead by raptor standards,” Farley announced.

“Then you’d better call Will Shaw into question as well.” Gerald sighed. “I’ve seen him with several different women in what you could say compromising positions. Which also calls into question his version of events as it led to Sarah’s near-expulsion from your clan years ago.” Gerald faced Sarah. “You have Linda and a few others to thank for sticking up for you. My father once told me that Larsen, Shaw and a few others were ready to string you up by your toes.”

“Funny how the men in our clan can get away with anything,” Sarah spat and turned to face the clan as a whole. “I can’t believe you people. You made my life hell, had the gall to try to attack me en masse, and the most you all can do is start *an inquiry* into this mess?” She turned to glare at the panel.

“Raptor politics, sorry,” Grady said. “Now if you were cats, we’d settle this with a battle to the death.”

“That’s a fine idea,” Cullen growled, stepping toward Dennis Larsen. “I challenge—”

“The hell you do.” Cullen’s mother elbowed him hard in the gut. “This isn’t your fight right now.”

“I challenge Jenny Larsen to a fight,” Sarah yelled, overriding Cullen’s complaints. “Winner lives, loser either dies or leaves town, along with her entire family.”

Silence reigned, and then chaos erupted as the room filled with shouts, cheers and a lot of betting.

Cullen disengaged from his mother and drew Sarah close. “You can’t do this.” He wanted nothing more than to protect his mate.

“I have to. This is my fight, Cullen. One I should have taken care of a long time ago. If I can’t stand up for myself, how I can I expect you to?”

She kissed him on the lips and stepped away, but Cullen wasn’t about to let her go so easily. He pulled her back for a kiss that left them both winded, amid catcalls and hoots for more.

“Really, Cullen. Did you have to make a scene?” Ian asked on a laugh. “That’s more Sean’s style.”

“Shut up, *baby*.” Sean grinned at the snarl Ian threw him.

But Cullen couldn’t stop worrying. He’d seen Jenny’s bird, and the bald eagle was huge. Her wingspan had to be at least five feet long, and she had no problem using her talons to dig and slice.

“Cullen, trust me. It’ll be okay.” Sarah forced him to bend low and cupped his cheek with her hand. “Look at all we accomplished just by standing up to them today.”

“I don’t give a shit about the clan.” He kissed her palm. “I don’t want to leave town, so don’t lose.”

“But, Cullen, this way you won’t have to. Only family has to leave—”

“Fuck that. *We’re* family.” Anger gave him the strength to tell her the truth. “I love you, dammit. So win one for me, mate.”

She opened her mouth, and nothing came out.

“I really like my workshop. I’d hate to have to move,” Cullen muttered.

Sarah smiled at him, her heart in her eyes. “I won’t make you move, *mate*. I promise.”

Overjoyed to hear her finally admit it, he hugged her tight. “It’s about damned time.” Then he glanced around and saw Jenny shifted and ready to fight, her bald eagle screeching with threat. “Just one thing, honey.”

“What?”

“No stripping in front of my brothers. Ever.” He forced the jerks to turn around, conscious none of them could stop grinning at him.

“‘Bout time you stopped mooning after her,” Sean whispered. He took a peek over his shoulder before Cullen could stop him. “Nice ass on the wallet chick, bro.”

“Sean Whitefeather, watch your manners,” his mother threatened. “Or I’ll watch them for you.” She winked at Cullen. “But you know, I like Sarah. Let’s keep her, hmm?”

Cullen grinned, and then his mate took to the skies, her claws outstretched. Damned if she wasn't more vicious than Jenny.

## Chapter Ten

Later that night, as Cullen and Sarah spent their first time alone that evening, Sarah found herself unable to speak. She was so in love with Cullen, and she knew this was more than she'd ever had with Will. Cullen had faults. He was domineering, not very social, and he'd done something to annoy most of the raptors in town before they'd left.

She still had a hard time believing he really loved her. What if he'd said what he had to give her confidence, so that she'd take Jenny down?

"What's the problem?" he growled and sank to the couch next to her. He looked exhausted. As if he had a right to be more tired than she was.

Sarah had put Jenny on her ass, but it hadn't been easy. Not used to combat, Sarah had more experience in hunting. She'd used that hunting ability, envisioning Jenny as the rabbit she wanted to sink her claws into. After several minutes of grueling air dives, she'd fainted, then struck Jenny hard. The taste for revenge seethed inside her, but Sarah knew what it was like to make a mistake. Time for Jenny to learn from hers.

Jenny and Dennis had been kicked out of the clan and out of the town. The investigation into Will Shaw grew more interesting when his wife stepped forward to offer her testimony. The poor harrier had been sorely treated by the man who showed the public one face and his mate another. Gemma Shaw advocated for Will's removal from clan leader office and offered up a new alternative with a nomination for Will's replacement.

Micah, once a leader in the eagle clan, would become a new clan leader for the raptors after the votes were officially tallied. Apparently, the raptors as a whole didn't care for their leaders any more than Sarah had. But none of them had stepped up to make a difference, not until Sheila Whitefeather planted that bug in Sarah's ear.

Sarah studied Cullen, wondering if he meant what he'd said earlier. "Would you really have left town if I'd lost to Jenny?"

He swore. "Are you serious?"

"I want to know." She felt defensive, as if she was the one in the wrong for asking.

"Thank God Linda convinced my family to stay in town while you and I sort this out." Cullen ran his hands through his hair and sat up straight. "You are the most oblivious woman I've ever met." He shot to his feet.

“What?” Growing more than a little angry, Sarah hurled a couch pillow at his head. “Just answer the question. Did you mean it?”

“Shit, woman. I’ve been coming into your damned diner for months. My pot roast is a helluva lot better than Mac’s.”

“But—”

“I can’t go to sleep without seeing you at least once a day. You’re screwing with my sexual fantasies, because every woman I dream about has your face.”

“Oh.”

“And I’ve been doing my damndest to get you pregnant since you’ve been here, in case you haven’t noticed,” he said, swearing again. He stood over her with a menacing glare, but the joy spreading through her took away any threat of danger. “You like me well enough when I’m deep inside you. What? You having second thoughts now? Well, fuck that. You’re staying. You’re mine, and I’m keeping you.”

“Cullen, shut up.” They both froze at the vehemence in her tone. Sarah stood with a grin. “I never thought I’d say this, but you talk too much.” She threaded her hands through his hair and brought his head down to meet hers. “I love you. I’m going to marry you. And we’re going to convince Micah to take that role as clan leader. That way they can never make us leave.”

Cullen stared at her, his eagle peering out at her with golden eyes filled with love. “You can’t take it back.”

“I know.” She kissed him again, her love flowing into him with every caress of her lips and tongue.

“Oh, baby. I want you so much.” Cullen sat her on top of him as he kissed her until she was dizzy. He slowly removed her clothing, piece by piece.

“This won’t work. You have too many clothes on.”

“Trust me,” he whispered as he took her nipple into his mouth.

“I do. I really do.”

He made love to her with his mouth, lifting her to straddle his face while he tongued her until she cried out in ecstasy. He continued to lick her, foraging deep with his tongue, but it wasn’t enough.

“I need you, Cullen.”

“Forever,” he said.

“Forever,” she agreed on a sigh. As she unwrapped her body from Cullen’s, she watched him undress. But then he did something that surprised her. He handed her his wallet.

“Um, I’m sure this is a symbolic gesture. But Cullen, I don’t need your money. I make a decent enough living working for Mac. I’ll find a better job someday, when I figure out what I really want to do.”

“Open it.” He looked tense. She stopped rambling enough to take the wallet from him. “Look inside the inner flap.”

Intrigued, she opened his wallet and put her fingers into the inner flap. There was something there. She pulled it out, only to stare wide-eyed at a picture of her taken months ago. It was creased and faded, as if the photo had been handled often.

“You’re the wallet chick. My brothers teased me unmercifully about that when Sean found it while rifling through my stuff,” he mumbled.

He looked adorable when he flushed with embarrassment. Tough Cullen Whitefeather reduced to mumbling about a girl. About *her*.

“Where did you get this?” Sarah was dumbfounded. The picture showed her laughing at something Julia had said. It was bright green outside, so the picture would have been taken sometime in the spring or summer of last year.

“I took it last year, on one of my first forays into town. I used to avoid Cougar Falls, like all the eagles did. We spent our time in the forests, meeting up at the clan leader’s nest a few times a month. But when the eagles left, we stayed. Mom wanted me to check out town life, to maybe socialize more. From the first moment I saw you, I was hooked.”

“You were?” she asked, breathless.

“I didn’t call it love. Not at first. Infatuation. Lust. Hell, I came into the diner so much that first week people thought I’d gone crazy.”

“But you never said anything.” Imagine that. Cullen Whitefeather infatuated with her.

“I could barely speak around you. You made me nervous, and still do,” he said with a scowl. “But don’t let it get to your head. I’m getting better around you.”

“Yes, you are.” She smiled at him, totally in love. *Yes, yes, mates. Love*, her bird echoed.

“Right.” He cleared his throat and stepped closer, taking the wallet from her hand. He tossed it aside, but took the picture from her hand and caressed it lovingly before setting it on the coffee table. “I wanted you. I fell in love with you. But I didn’t know how to say it. You’re so far out of my league, Sarah. So pretty, so funny, so smart. I’m a simple craftsman with a crazy family. The raptors hate me.”

“You called them a bunch of henpecked asswipes,” she reminded him with a grin.

“They are.” He cradled her to his body, making her very aware of how much he still wanted her. “But you’re not. You’re everything to me. If you still want to move, we can go.”

“But what about your family?”

“They’ll always be my family. But you’re my mate. My love.” He kissed her, and she couldn’t stop the tears of joy from sliding down her cheeks. “Will you marry me, Sarah? Bear my young? Be my wife?”

“Only if you promise we’ll stay here, at least for now. I think the clan is ready for some changes. I know I am.” She nuzzled his cheek. “Can I tell you a secret?”

He lowered her to the floor, spread her thighs, and sank inside her. “Ah, yes. Tell me anything you want, baby.”

She sighed, finally happy. "I never made a fuss about birth control because a part of me, the insane part, always wanted a piece of you with me. My eagle's been in love with you forever."

"Smart bird." He thrust faster, deeper, and kissed her. "God, I love you, Sarah."

"Come inside me, mate. Give me everything," she rasped as he took her to heaven. She came when he did, shuddering as her body convulsed around the hard male inside her.

"You already have everything, Sarah. All of me."

"And to think you were there all the time. Just waiting for me to notice you."

He kissed her again. "Always waiting for you, and only you. I'm a true raptor, Sarah. I'll always be faithful. It's a Whitefeather trait, you know."

"Oh hell, they're at it again," Sean complained from the kitchen.

Sarah blushed, and Cullen groaned. She hurried to scoot out from under him, glad the family remained out of sight. "How about we take a flight outside? It's clear out there for once. And maybe when we come back, you can install a few locks on your bedroom door?"

"Hell, yes. Now shift before my brother sees you."

She laughed and turned into her eagle, gratified when Cullen did the same. They blinked at the rest of the family following Sean into the living room.

"Thank God he shifted." Ian shuddered. "Cullen's ass is something I can do without seeing for the rest of my life."

Sheila glared at her sons, then turned back to Sarah and Cullen. "Blessings upon your union. Your father would be so pleased, Cullen." She blinked back tears. "Now why don't you two take a celebratory flight over Sarah's *new* territory, her new home, while I figure out which Whitefeather's getting mated next?"

Sarah and Cullen screeched with laughter before flying out the open back door into a dark night sky. They flew higher and higher, together as one. In the distance, Cullen's brothers' arguments floated on the wind.

"*A perfect ending to a perfect night.*" Cullen laughed.

"*I love you, Cullen. Now let's see who can fly fastest toward that large stone.*" She motioned to the boulder in question.

"*You're on.*"

Cullen won by the tip of a wing, but Sarah didn't consider herself a loser. How could she with the raptor she loved by her side?

## About the Author

To learn more about Marie Harte, please visit [www.marieharte.com](http://www.marieharte.com) or her blog at <http://marieharte.blogspot.com>. Send an email to Marie at [marie\\_harte@yahoo.com](mailto:marie_harte@yahoo.com) or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Marie at [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Marie\\_Harte](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Marie_Harte)



Look for these titles by Marie Harte

*Now Available:*

Feral Attraction  
Rachel's Totem  
Duncan's Descent  
The Dragons' Demon  
Enjoying the Show  
A Scorching Seduction  
I Dream of Dragons Vol. 1  
Sins of Summer

*Mountain man or mountain lion? In his case-one and the same.*

## Rachel's Totem

© 2008 Marie Harte

*A Feral Attraction Story.*

When Rachel arrives in Cougar Falls for a reading of her aunt's will, she finds herself in a typical mountain town. Except that it's not quite...typical. It's full of the requisite, rough-hewn mountaineers, but these men seem more animal than man.

And one of the rude strangers brings out the animal in her during an embarrassingly orgasmic-and scorching-sexual encounter in an alley. The fantastic tales that the townsfolk tell about the Ac-Taw, a clan of people who can shift into animals, are nothing but folklore. Or are they?

Burke is stunned by his response to Rachel, and even more so when she innocently shows signs of possessing Ac-Taw blood. And this puts her in more danger than she knows, danger that only increases the urgency to mark her as his own.

Rachel comes to realize she's inherited much more than just property. She has also inherited a destiny to protect her newfound home.

For the Ac-Taw aren't just legend-they're real.

*Warning, this title contains the following: graphic language, ménage a trois, growling, and hot, steamy sex between shifters in love :)*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Rachel's Totem:*

"I'm not sure." Gerald frowned and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Rachel. Not exactly polite to discuss other matters when you're here for Charlotte's will."

"No, that's okay. I'm in no rush."

*Well I am.* Burke took a seat next to Rachel across from Gerald, who sat in a huge leather chair behind his desk. *Let's find that totem and get back to the important things in life. Like how I'm going to seduce Rachel before she turns all prickly again.*

"It's just that my assistant, Julia, is always a rock, always here and helping. And something came up with her family in Washington so she had to leave yesterday—"

"Gerald, can we please get on with this?" Burke sighed.

Gerald cleared his throat and smiled apologetically. "Right, well. Before we begin, is there anything I can get you, Rachel? A glass of water, a soda, or maybe some coffee?"

Rachel shook her head. "Thanks, but Burke's right. Since we're here, no sense putting it off any longer. You might as well tell me what Aunt Charlotte wanted done with her things."

"Of course."

Nice how the SOB completely ignored Burke, who could have used something to drink. In a steady drone, Gerald read through most of the generalities of the will. All of Charlotte's personal possessions and money, investments and the like, went to Rachel.

"And as the only relative Charlotte truly cared about since your father passed away, you've inherited everything she considered dear to her. Including the house."

*Shit.*

"The property, however..." Gerald paused, and Burke wanted to punch him for drawing this out. "The property is divided between you and the Chastells." Gerald turned to Burke. "You've been wanting to buy from Charlotte forever. Well, Burke, now's your chance. If Rachel decides to sell, everything on the property, to include the house and the material within it, becomes yours." *The totem*, he meant but didn't say. With the totem back in the hands of protectors who both understood and respected the ancient relic, peace would surely return to Cougar Falls. No more clan wars, and no more threats of strangers having a hold on something as valuable as the totem.

Rachel stared at Gerald, her gaze narrowing with suspicion as it lit on Burke. "Are you saying Mr. Chastell wants my aunt's property? And that she steadily refused to sell it?"

Burke had a sudden ache in the pit of his belly, a feeling that often preceded something bad about to happen.

"That's what I'm saying." Gerald stacked his papers and squared them. "Charlotte's property and the Chastells' border one another. They've always been friendly, don't get me wrong. But it's no secret Burke and his brothers want to reclaim the land that their great-great grandfather gave to one of your relatives so many years ago."

"I see." She glared at Burke, and he stared back, confused.

"What?"

"Nothing," she snapped. Turning back to Gerald, she pasted a sugary-sweet smile on her face. "So the house is mine, and the property is split how?"

"It's a bit complicated. I'll drive you out to the property so I can show you both. Charlotte was very clear about this." Gerald turned sharp eyes on Burke, as if willing him to listen.

Burke, however, didn't understand what the hell had crawled up Rachel's ass. He couldn't deny her fury made him hot, but he didn't understand what he'd done wrong. Was she suddenly blaming him for their time together in the alley? It wasn't as if he'd staged that fight with those knuckle-dragging wolf Shifters. And he sure as hell hadn't planned to come in his jeans while dry-fucking her against a dirty brick wall.

"Burke, I said I'll drive Rachel out to the property now. Perhaps you'd care to follow, so I only have to do this once?"

Burke nodded. "Fine, sure. Look, why don't you go file your papers or something? I need a word with Rachel."

"Yes, Mr. Winter. I'd like a word with Mr. Chastell as well." Rachel's glare could have cut steel.

Gerald glanced from Rachel to Burke and unsuccessfully masked a grin. "Fine. I'll be waiting outside when you're through." Grabbing his papers and shoving them in his briefcase, he left the room, closing the door behind him.

The minute he left, Rachel stood ramrod straight and glared down her sexy little nose at Burke. "You arrogant asshole."

"What's your problem?" Burke honestly had no idea why she'd grown so upset.

"You thought screwing me would sway me into selling my aunt's place to you?"

Burke scowled. "Now wait a minute, Rachel. I—"

She leaned down and poked him in the chest, *hard*, stirring his instincts to fight back. Or perhaps, to turn their tussle into something more...intimate. "You wait a minute, Chastell. If you wanted to buy the place, all you had to do was ask. That scene in the alley was totally unnecessary. And not that good to boot."

He launched himself out of his chair to glare down at her. "Not that good, *Miss Penny*? First of all, that 'scene' in the alley, as you put it, was not staged. Second, that was anything but a real fuck. We had all our clothes on, for Christ's sake. And third." He paused to close what little distance remained between them. Staring directly into her eyes, nose to nose, he growled his last words. "The orgasm we shared was more than good, it was explosive. Lie to yourself if you want to, but you came hard, like a shot." He licked his lips, unable to help how turned on she made him in her anger. "And I can still smell your come creaming your panties. Hell, right now you want nothing more than a hard fuck right on Gerald's desk, isn't that right?"

Her pupils dilated with lust, and her scent filled the room. Pure, unadulterated sex.

"Fuck. You."

"Sure thing, honey. You just name the time and place."

He watched in amazement as her pupils began to elongate. He could smell the familiar scent of feline musk flooding the room and waited, his breath held, as Rachel amazingly began to *turn*.

Her hair began to rise as her body was covered in a field of static energy, and her teeth grew sharp as she hissed at him in anger. God, she made him burn. The mixture of mountain lion and woman was almost more than he could take. Glancing at Gerald's desk, Burke figured he could have it cleared in one swipe of his arm. He'd bend her over the solid oak on her belly and yank those jeans and panties off her legs. Within seconds he'd lower his own clothes, just enough to spring his cock free before he'd shove it hard and deep into that honeyed, wet pussy.

Rachel's hands fisted into paws as she raised one arm as if to strike.

*Do it. Please, touch me and I swear I'll mark you as one of mine in a heartbeat.* The choice, even unknowingly made, had to be hers.

Gerald, damn his ass, chose that minute to knock at the door. "Hey, is everything all right in there?"

*Son of a bitch.* Burke knew Gerald could smell the passion raging in the room, the scent of a female in heat overpowering enough to easily reach the lawyer outside the office.

Rachel blinked, and that suddenly her shift vanished as if it had never been. She swayed and righted herself, still miffed enough not to want Burke's touch. "Come near me again and I'll geld you." Sniffing, she turned on her heel and stalked out the door, nearly knocking over Gerald, who waited impatiently on the other side.

Gerald watched Rachel go with amusement, his lips quirked in an aggravating smirk.

"Not one word." Burke stormed through the door, knocking Gerald into the wall as he passed, heading for the bathroom to finally clean up. "Not one fucking word."

*When there's a tiger—and a lion—on your tail, there's no escape...*

## Theirs to Capture

© 2009 Shelli Stevens

Delilah is strong, independent—and a princess on the run. Her father, King of the Falcon kingdom, wants to unite her with Pierce, Prince of the Tiger kingdom, and Jason, Prince of the Lions. Never can she imagine giving herself to one man if there is no love—let alone two! So she flees her home in hopes of avoiding the union.

Delilah may be dead-set against the plan, but Jason and Pierce have no doubts. She is the one they want to complete their triad, to be their mate. She alone has the power to form the bond that will, in turn, join all their kingdoms in peace.

They're prepared to use every means of pleasure to convince her they are all destined to be together. But first they have to catch her...

*Warning: This book is hot! Hot! Hot! Threesomes, m/m, and capture fantasies, oh my!*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Theirs to Capture:*

Her head shook from side to side, the panic in her eyes increasing. "I won't do it. I won't, Pierce."

"Yes, Delilah, you will." He slid his hand up the back of her neck, holding her head still as his mouth descended onto hers.

Her lips remained tightly pressed together, refusing to open to his tongue. With a soft laugh, he nipped lightly at her bottom lip. Her gasp of surprise gave him the opportunity to slip inside the forbidden cavern of her mouth.

Her hands slammed against his chest, attempting to push him away, but they were no more effective than if she had been using her wings. Instead, the touch of her soft hands inflamed him further. His cock throbbed, lengthened and pressed into her belly.

He sought her tongue, teasing it with soft gentle flicks, before curling his own around it and sucking gently. It only took a moment to realize she'd stopped pushing against him, and instead those delicate hands now explored his chest openly.

Lifting his head just a bit, he murmured a throaty, "Yes. Touch me, Delilah." Then he claimed her mouth again.

Her hands moved downward on him. Down his chest, to his abdomen. The breath locked in his chest. *Lower, just a little lower.*

She hesitated only a moment before her fingers slipped those last few inches. His cock twitched against the edge of her hand and when she finally wrapped her fingers around his flesh, he about came in a heartbeat.

Until she squeezed. Tightly.

Pierce froze, his knees locking as pain signals rushed toward his brain.

“Delilah,” he choked out. “That’s a bit hard.”

“So I noticed.” She smirked. “I asked you to release me, Pierce. Now back off or I’ll break it in half.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible, little one.” But he took a step backward, his only thought for the moment that she needed to release her death grip on his cock.

Her fingers unwrapped from around him and, just as fast, she slammed her palms against his chest, pushing him backward.

Pierce stumbled, trying to regain his footing and reach for her at the same time. She spun, ready to take flight.

Relief poured through him as she was swiftly grabbed by Jason, who’d come up silently behind them.

“Jason!” She retreated, obviously startled, and bumped right back into Pierce.

Pierce drew in a deep breath, grabbing her hips to hold her immobile. He willed himself to control the anger that now burned in his gut. She’d threatened to break his cock in half like it was a damn sausage at a festival.

“This time, Delilah, you’ve gone too far.” Jason shook his head, his eyes suspiciously bloodshot. “I do believe we will have to agree upon some form of punishment to bestow upon you.”

*Punishment.* Pierce slid one hand down to the rounded curve of her ass and squeezed the soft flesh. *Now that sounded like a lovely idea.*

Delilah whimpered, and though he couldn’t see her face, he could well envision her wide eyes and the realization that she’d gotten herself in too deep.

Pulling his hand back, he swung it forward again to connect sharply with one round cheek.

“Oh!” Her shrill cry echoed in the woods, sending birds scattering up into the trees.

Delilah arched away from Pierce’s hand, but with Jason so close in front of her, the movement forced her body flush against him.

Pierce stepped forward again, so she was sandwiched between both their bodies. Jason closed his hands over Pierce’s hips, trapping her between them.

The result was an image so close to what they’d experience once they all joined together. It was so intimate and erotic that it startled him. Heat radiated between their bodies as a sizzling undercurrent heightened all of Pierce’s senses.

His gaze locked with Jason’s and he saw the same awareness in the other prince’s eyes.

“You feel it, little one,” Pierce whispered against her ear. “Don’t you?”

*Something wild this way comes...*

## Temptation Unleashed

© 2008 Kari Thomas

Once a powerful, practicing Wiccan, Kira Douglas has reluctantly moved to wild and beautiful Sedona, Arizona for only one reason—assume custody of her dead sister’s daughter. She immediately runs into an obstacle. The child’s uncle, the disturbingly sexy Aiden Calhoun, refuses to give her up.

Aiden has good reason for not allowing Kira custody of his precious niece. The child is half witch, half shapeshifter. Allowing her to take the girl could expose the family’s shapeshifting secret he has spent a lifetime protecting.

Their instant attraction isn’t just an inconvenient temptation. It could put his entire family in danger.

But an evil force is re-emerging, bent on destroying everything they know and love. The only way to survive is to put all differences aside.

And overcome the nightmare that once broke Kira’s faith.

This title has been revised and expanded from its previously published version.

*Warning: This book contains explicit, howling-under-the-desert-moon love scenes and some wash-your-mouth-out-with-soap language.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Temptation Unleashed:*

*Tough, aren’t you, baby.* He managed to repress another wolfish smile. Even though he liked her spunk, he didn’t trust her.

Not an inch.

“There’s not much left to discuss,” he stated. “Until a judge legally decides one way or another, Marissa stays here. With us. If I allow you visitation rights, it will be under the strict rule that you visit her here. And you will not be alone with her at any time. Are you willing to accept these stipulations?” He watched her eyes narrow at his terms. He could almost hear her thoughts and his body reacted, instantly aroused at her show of defiance.

Damn, but she was making him feel things he’d never felt before. *Man, she’s a fiery little thing.*

“Those are ridiculous stipulations,” she muttered. “But it seems I don’t have many choices, do I? Fine, I agree.”

Aiden searched her eyes. She’d given in far too easily. “Why do I have a suspicion that you’re calculating just how much you can get away with?”

She caught him off-guard with a smile that was so stunning it stole his breath.

“Has anyone ever told you you’re a first-class jerk?”



Aiden recovered quickly, surprised at her saucy comeback. “What has that got to do with me asking you about what kind of sneaky ideas are forming in that pretty little head of yours?”

She sighed, the sound impatient. “Obviously denying that remark isn’t going to get me anywhere. We don’t trust each other. But no matter how much you hate it, Aiden, I’m here to stay. I will be a part of Marissa’s life.” She folded her arms across her chest and frowned at him.

She looked so adorably frustrated that he frowned back to keep from grinning like a besotted fool.

Her voice took on a no-nonsense tone. “So, how do we work around this...distrust and come to some kind of agreement?”

He knew what he’d like to do.

His pulse quickened. He was about to find out if her lips were as sweet as he was betting they were. Nothing seemed more important at that moment.

“You promise me no tricks,” he answered smoothly, “and I allow you visitation with Marissa, anytime you like. Simple enough.” He reached up and clasped her chin before she could realize his intent. “And we’ll seal our bargain,” with a barely restrained growl he leaned forward and whispered huskily, “with a kiss.” He captured her astonished gasp with his mouth, sealing his lips across hers.

He only meant to push her, to see how she’d react. Had only meant to take just a small sample...

But it wasn’t turning out that way.

The moment he tasted her unique sweetness, all coherent thought flew from his mind. His lips slanted over hers and a hunger like none he’d ever experienced swamped his senses.

So incredibly soft. Sweeter than heaven.

He deepened the kiss, barely registering her slight whimper of protest. She started to pull away and he grasped a handful of her silky curls, tugging just hard enough to keep her leaning forward. Blood fired his veins. His body hardened, muscles clenched with restrained fervor threatening to make him forget the reasons he’d kissed her in the first place.

He had to stop now. Before he couldn’t.

The startling realization struck him hard and he broke the kiss. Damn, but he’d come too close to losing all reason and taking...*more*. His heated gaze roamed over her flushed features, noting with satisfaction that she had been just as lost in the kiss. Her breathing was catchy, her cheeks flushed, her eyes slumberous. Her pink, moist lips were swollen from the pressure he’d used, but he couldn’t make himself feel bad about it.

She had a mouth he could easily become addicted to.

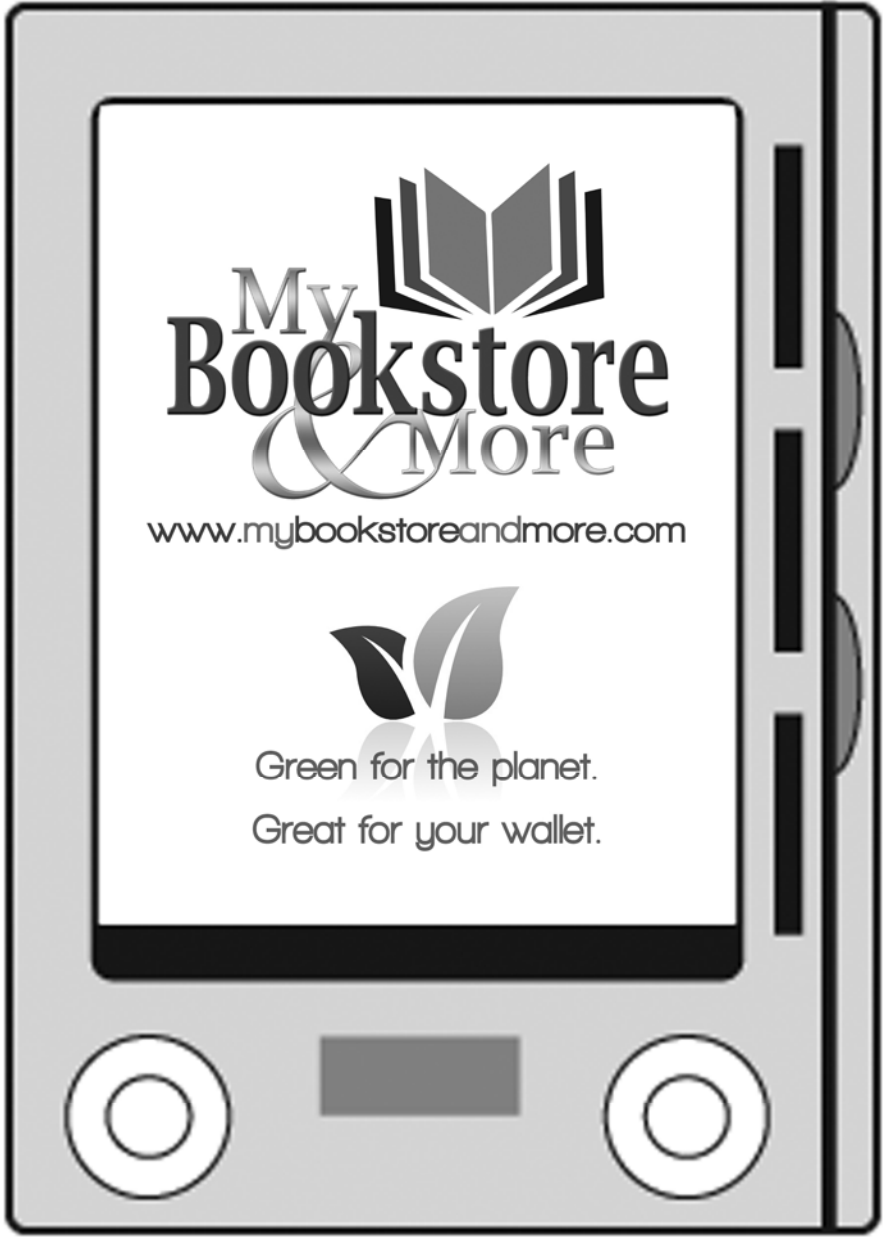
His breath still rough, he murmured huskily, “You’re one potent little contradiction, Kira Douglas.”

Looking adorably baffled, Kira asked, “Why did you kiss me?”

Aiden stepped away in one graceful move. He ran a shaky hand through his long hair and shrugged. “Sealing a bargain. Nothing more.”

“Most people shake hands.”

He smiled, his lips curving slowly. “I’m not most people, little witch. You’ll soon discover that.”



My   
**Bookstore**  
& More

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



Green for the planet.  
Great for your wallet.

# Samhain Publishing, Ltd.

*It's all about the story...*

Action/Adventure  
Fantasy  
Historical  
Horror  
Mainstream  
Mystery/Suspense  
Non-Fiction  
Paranormal  
Red Hots!  
Romance  
Science Fiction  
Western  
Young Adult

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