



GUARDIAN INVESTIGATIONS

The background of the book cover features a woman with dark, wavy hair and red lipstick, looking slightly to the side. A man with green eyes and a black raven perched on his shoulder are visible in the background. The woman's hand is in the foreground, wearing a ring.

WINGS OF THE RAVEN

CINDY SPENCER PAPE

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Wings of the Raven

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

Guardian Investigations

WINGS OF THE RAVEN

Cindy Spencer Pape

Dedication

To the members of four great Michigan writer's groups:
GDRWA, MMRWA, GRRWG, and UWG.
I get something different from each one,
but they all make me a better writer and a happier person.

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Prologue

Pregnant.

I stared down at the little plastic test strip in my hand and willed myself not to throw up. The bright pink plus sign might as well have been flashing neon—it burned into my retinas just that vividly.

Holy hell, the shit was really going to hit the fan.

I slumped down onto the closed lid of the toilet in my San Francisco apartment. What the hell was I going to do? I needed to tell Will, of course. We might fight like crazy when we weren't going at it like minks, but he was a family friend as well as one of my business partners, and he deserved to find out he was going to be a father before one of my brothers or cousins did and immediately beat the shit out of him. I had no doubt Will could hold his own against any one of the Maddox men, but there were five of them and they'd all have the same gut reaction, even though Will was their partner and friend. None of them had ever gotten the hint that I wasn't twelve anymore and didn't need their protection.

Yeah, because obviously I was doing such a great job of managing my life on my own.

Chapter One

I didn't cry at the wedding, but I did at the reception.

Don't get me wrong, I was thrilled to see my cousin Evan so happy, and I even liked the bright turquoise bridesmaid gown his new wife had selected for me to wear. I was more than happy to welcome Hannah into both the family and the business I shared with my two brothers, three cousins, and Hannah's brother Will. I was thrilled to no longer be the only woman in the firm. No, the only problem I had that night was William Tanner Lightfoot.

Ever since I'd joined Guardian Investigations and Security—the company started by my older brothers and cousins, and one cousin's army buddy—the only partner who wasn't a relative had been an enormous pain in my ass. Will thinks I should be nothing more than the office manager. Never mind my degrees in forensic psychology—I'm a trained profiler. Never mind the black belt in Aikido, never mind I win the local gun club's marksmanship awards every single year. And the fact that, as a member of the Maddox family, I'm a guardian, a magical shape shifter, still doesn't swing it. To Will, I'm just a silly girl, playing at being a detective.

So why was I crying at Evan and Hannah's wedding reception? Three guesses. Of course it was because of Will.

I don't cry easily—I really don't. But sometimes, if I'm completely and totally pissed off, the tears leak out. It's an involuntary physiological reaction, one that has annoyed me my entire life. And Will knew it, too, damn his hide.

"Now that we've got Hannah in the field, you'll be able to stay in the office more, manage the business end of things," he said as we danced. It was the official song we were required to dance together as attendants at the wedding.

"Or we can simply accept more clients," I returned. "Mindy is a perfectly good office manager and accountant—she doesn't need me looking over her shoulder."

"I'm just saying, you're more use there than in the field," he said, rubbing it in. "Not like you have any real training anyway. You're too soft-hearted to be an operative."

Maybe he had a point, but the way he said it just made me see red—and not the burnished bronze of his part-Navajo skin. “Last time I checked, we were both full partners in Guardian.” I carefully restrained myself from stepping on his foot with a spiked heel. “Which means you’re not my boss. I get to pick my cases just like everyone else.”

Now security work and private investigation isn’t usually anywhere near as glamorous as people think. Mostly it’s a lot of boring insurance work, processing security clearances, testing alarm systems and taking pictures for divorce cases. But Guardian had a reputation among certain circles for being able to handle cases of an unusual nature—and by that I mean other people with paranormal abilities were often involved. So, yeah, things sometimes got messy. I’d learned to deal, and I liked to think I was pretty damned good at it.

Then Will really stuck his foot in his mouth. “Yeah, well maybe we should take a vote and revisit that part of the partnership agreement. I don’t think you belong in the field. Ever.”

Thankfully the song ended just then, so I could escape before anyone saw the tears—or the steam that was probably coming out my ears. I was going to kill him, I swore. Just as soon as it wouldn’t ruin the wedding.

I fled the dance floor through a glass door to the hotel gardens. They had little fairy lights twinkling in the trees, and it was a balmy, beautiful evening. I scurried through the garden until I found a bench under a tree, pretty much hidden from everything. I let the tears run their course, wiping them away with a napkin I’d grabbed from the bar on my way past.

I didn’t hear him creep up on me—the man has the movements of a damned cat. While my hearing is better than the average human, even when I’m not in my raven form, even I can’t hear the Lightfoot siblings unless they want me to.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I didn’t mean you weren’t any good, but damn it, you have to admit, you don’t have the heart for wet work.”

I tipped my head, conceding the point. He’d held my hair while I puked my guts out after my first fire fight—with a band of rogue wizards, nonetheless. Yale still had lightning bolt scars on his shoulder from that one. Messy didn’t begin to describe it.

Will sat beside me and put his hand on my shoulder. “Come back inside, Carys.”

He sat so close I could feel his warmth, even through his tuxedo jacket. And I could smell him, damn it. The antagonism between us would have been easier to deal with if the man's scent didn't make me wet every time I got within five feet of him. He was infuriating, overbearing, and fucking gorgeous. Life just wasn't fair.

We turned to face each other at exactly the same moment.

"Carys..." he began in a voice much deeper than his usual baritone.

"Will..."

We both broke off and laughed, at least sort of. His was breathy and mine probably sounded more like hysteria.

"Ladies first," he said. Even in the near-darkness, I could see the wry grin that made my stomach tighten every time I saw it.

I shook my head. "Nothing. I was just thinking we should put this on hold until Monday. We don't want to ruin the wedding."

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing," he admitted sheepishly. "So shall we declare a truce for now? I'll promise to keep my mouth shut if you promise not to tell my sister I made you cry."

"Deal."

I held out my hand, but Will had other ideas. Instead of taking my hand, he put his on my shoulders and slowly drew me forward, until my breasts were flush against his broad chest. He gave me plenty of time to get away, but I was frozen, unable to even breathe in case it broke the spell.

Then, finally, his lips came down on mine. Will is a lot taller than me, so I had my head turned way up to look at him. My eyelids fluttered shut as I tuned out every sensation in the world aside from the exquisite pressure of Will's mouth on mine.

He kissed gently, but with the same firm confidence he did everything else. Somehow my hands ended up clutching the lapels of his tux, and his had moved around to my back. He pressed forward with his tongue and I opened instinctively, welcoming him into the wet heat of my mouth.

He explored the inside of my mouth hungrily and eagerly, tasting every ridge and crevice. I sucked on his tongue, which elicited a moan that rumbled into my mouth. He unzipped my dress and slid his hands inside as the spaghetti straps slipped down my shoulders. Desperately needing to feel his skin myself, I tugged his shirt free of his pants

and ran my hands up along his rippled abs. The warm, solid feel of him made my womb clench with longing.

I don't know how long we kissed—it couldn't have been too long, because we still had all our clothes on, mostly, when we heard the cough.

We sprang apart, both breathing heavily. I was impressed despite myself. I hadn't thought anything alive could sneak up on Will, but I hadn't counted on another Lightfoot.

"They're looking for you two," Will's grandfather said. Josiah Lightfoot might have been over eighty, but he was still a man who inspired respect and admiration. I'm sure my face was beet red as I tried to catch my breath.

"Shit," Will whispered so softly I barely heard. To his grandfather, he said, "Thanks, Granddad. We'll be right in. Give us two minutes."

"I'll let them know you're on the way," the older man said with a warm chuckle. As he turned to walk away, he added, "Might want to get the lipstick off your face first, son."

"God, I can't believe he caught us sneaking off to neck like a couple of horny teenagers." Will reached behind me to zip up the back of my dress, then stood and tucked his shirt back into the waist of his trousers. I was glad I had on a full petticoat with lots of layers, so my wetness wouldn't have soaked through to my dress. Wouldn't that have been fun to explain?

I wanted to point out that we hadn't snuck out intending to play kissy-face, but I was still busy freaking out about the fact that Will had actually kissed me. Me—Carys Maddox, short and pale with riotous black curls and boring grey eyes. Since Will was six foot six and ripped, with a face that should have been on magazine covers, this was, indeed, a momentous occasion.

And it had been fabulous.

Will pulled a handkerchief out of the inside pocket of his coat and wiped his face. I could barely see the spot of lipstick on his cheek, but even without a mirror, he found it unerringly and took care of it. Sometimes hanging out with psychics can be pretty weird.

We went back in, stopping in the restrooms to check our faces and hair, then walked together up to the front, where Hannah was getting ready to throw her bouquet.

I hung back, feeling silly up there at thirty-two years old. One of Hannah's teenage cousins caught the bouquet, and there was much cheering and laughing.

My brother Rhys caught the garter. I think because he was thinking of something else and forgot to duck. He made a nice show of flirting with the gawky young girl, managing to be sweet instead of creepy. If I had to pick a favourite in my family, it's Rhys. We're the two who don't quite fit the mould. Will had blended into the woodwork, avoiding the garter like it was toxic waste. But he stood next to me a little later as the bride and groom cut the cake, and then even later as we waved them off, their limo trailing more tin cans than a soup factory.

"Are you staying here at the hotel?" he asked.

I shivered, and he had his jacket off and around my shoulders before I could blink.

"Yeah." I snuggled into the jacket and leaned against a potted palm in the circle drive. Everyone else began to disperse back into the hotel or off to the parking valet, and soon, we were alone. "I'm up on the sixth floor. How about you?"

"Also sixth floor. I've never had a sister get married before, so I didn't know if I'd be wanting to drink or not." He gave me that wry smile again, and I swear, my knees actually buckled. If his arm hadn't gone around me, I'd have fallen into a turquoise heap on the concrete. "Come on, I'll walk you up."

He took my arm, and I felt the warmth of his touch all the way to my core. My bones went soft and my nipples peaked, rasping against my bra. I'd have been embarrassed by my body's instant and total reaction to his touch, but I'd heard that same deep, rough note in his voice that I'd heard in the garden, right before he'd kissed me.

Of course I peeked down at the front of his trousers as we crossed the lobby to the elevators. I'm only human—most of the time. Then I swallowed hard as all the moisture in my body immediately went south. He was interested, and he was big. I tried not to stare at the prominent bulge in his pants while we waited for the elevator. Instead I looked up into his face, and that was even a bigger mistake.

Will looks a lot like his Native American ancestors, with his brown-black hair, high cheekbones, and dark bronze skin. One thing he gets from his Romany grandmother, whom I'd also met this weekend, is his vivid, emerald green eyes. They can flash with fire or go cold as green ice, but I'd never seen them go dark jade before, glittering and dangerous. I live in a family of men who can shape shift into actual predators, but I'd never seen one of them, even in combat, radiate the level of intensity I saw in Will's eyes in that moment.

We made it into the elevator before he was on me, pushing me back into the wall while his mouth ravaged mine. There was nothing soft or gentle about the kiss this time. This was all about domination and possession. Goddess help me, I loved it. If my legs had been free of the dress, I'd have climbed him like a tree.

He put both hands flat on my waist, then slid them up to rest just below my breasts. I'm a little flat, but he didn't seem to mind. Will smoothed his hands up over my curves, which were pretty much armour-plated in my padded long-line bra. Pressing hard with his thumbs, he rubbed my nipples, making me moan into his mouth.

The doors dinged open, and Will grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the elevator at almost a run. With his other hand, he fumbled in his pocket, pulling out the key card just as he got to his door. When he opened the door, he pulled me inside, then slammed the door behind us, rattling the picture on the wall above the bed.

The room wasn't big—it was only a few steps to the bed. I kicked my high heeled pumps off on the way, and Will tossed his jacket aside, missing the dresser by inches. His bowtie and cummerbund followed, while I pulled the silk flower out of my hair. Then I turned so Will could unzip the gown. When it fell to my feet, I kicked it aside and turned to watch as Will pulled his shirt over his head and dropped his trousers and boxers to the floor.

Oh, gods, he was everything I had imagined. My mouth literally began to water. As tall as he was, it was easy to be fooled into thinking he was skinny, but in reality, those long, lean muscles were perfectly honed machines. His chest was hairless—I didn't know if he waxed or if it was just a result of his Native American heritage. All I knew was I wanted to kiss every inch of that smooth bronze skin rippling over his eight-pack abs and rock-solid pecs, all the way down to where his cock stood at attention amid a tuft of inky hair. It was long and straight, lined with a road map of dark veins, and the head was oval, and flushed a deep purple with his arousal. A tiny droplet of pre-cum beaded at the slit. I was already soaked, but I creamed even more from just looking at him and anticipating how that was going to feel all up inside me.

"Now who has too many clothes on?" he said in a deep, raspy voice.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" I taunted back. My long-line strapless bra was beige, supposedly skin-tone, but dark enough to stand out against my milky-pale skin. With it, I wore a satin thong in the same shade.

"Come here and find out." He stood poised in a warrior's pose, feet apart, knees slightly bent, ready for anything that came at him.

His confidence and arrogance annoyed me no end, but in the bedroom they excited the hell out of me. Steadily, I walked towards him, stopping just a few inches away.

"Now turn around."

I obeyed, then shivered as I felt his hands on the long row of hooks running from mid back to my waist.

"What do they make these things out of," he muttered in a husky voice, "flak jackets?"

"Something like that." My own tone was breathy and shallow.

When the last hook had been opened and the offending garment fell to the floor, he put his hands on my shoulders and turned me to face him. I bit my lower lip as his gaze raked over me from head to toe.

"Perfect," he said with a sigh. "You look like Chinese porcelain, so creamy and delicate. But I've seen you take down an armed thug with nothing but a baton. And these..." He brought his hands down to cup my breasts, though they barely filled his palms. "Dainty and sweet. And all crinkled up, just for me."

He rasped my pebbled nipples with his thumbs, drawing a moan from the back of my throat.

"You like that, don't you?" He moved sideways to sit on the bed, pulling me between his thighs. Once he had me where he wanted me, he lowered his head to take my nipple in his mouth.

"Will," I cried, leaning into him. I clutched at his shoulders to keep my balance as my knees threatened to give out.

One of his hands was on my ass, kneading the muscle, while with the other, he massaged the breast he wasn't suckling. My core ached, and I tilted my hips, trying to rub my mound against him. His cock jutted into my stomach, as hard as a tree limb.

Slowly, he slipped his hand down between my buttocks and under the drenched string of my thong. He inched his fingers forward, until they parted the swollen lips of my pussy and found my warm, wet entrance.

I bucked against his hand, desperate to feel him—any part of him—inside my aching channel. Instead, he rubbed his fingers along my folds, teasing me further.

"You're so fucking responsive," he said as he switched hands, bringing the one wet with my juices up to his mouth and sucking my cream off his fingers, while he slid the other one between my folds. "I want to see you come for me, Carys." He lowered his mouth to my other breast and suckled hard.

This time, he moved his hand farther forward, pressing on my clit with his fingers and tucking his thumb up into my slit. He was relentless, driving me higher and higher with just the right speed and pressure. When I was almost at the peak, he used his teeth on my nipple and flicked my clit hard with his finger. I fell over the edge, wailing his name as sparks of pleasure cascaded through my body, radiating from my womb out to my fingers and toes.

He stroked me slowly while I came down. I slumped in his arms, my head falling forward onto his shoulder. Moving carefully, he lifted me in one arm and pulled the bedspread down with the other. As soon as he'd lain me down on the sheet, he stepped over to pull something out of his suitcase. Ropes? Toys? I watched him avidly, with no idea what he was up to until he pulled out a small box and set it on the nightstand.

Oh. I couldn't believe I'd forgotten protection. Normally I'm super-cautious. I never forget. I trusted Will implicitly in the area of disease, but I hadn't been on the pill since my last semi-serious relationship five years earlier. Embarrassed at my lapse and grateful that he'd remembered, I watched as he pulled out a condom and rolled it on. Good thing they make those in extra large.

As soon as he was done, he moved onto the bed, coming to his knees between my legs. Sliding his hands under my hips, he lifted my butt up off the bed. He hooked his elbows under my knees and spread me wide before leaning down to taste me.

I clenched my fists in the sheet at the first touch of his tongue on my swollen clit. Even though I'd just come, I was still achingly aroused, and the man was a master with his mouth. He licked his way up and down my slit, then stabbed his tongue up into my pussy, wringing another small orgasm from my overloaded system. After he licked up the rush of cream, he lowered me onto his thighs and slid his cock inside in one slow, steady thrust.

Oh, goddess, I'd never felt so full in my life. I was drenched, but I still felt every bit of friction as he began to move, just because he had my tissues stretched to their limits. His movements were slow and sure, and I longed to make that iron control of his crack. I reached up and tugged on his arms, pulling him down on top of me. Or tried to—I

couldn't budge him, but after a moment, he shifted, lying above me with his weight propped on his elbows.

"Wanted things up close and personal, huh?" He kissed the corner of my mouth.

"Uh-huh. I wanted you to kiss me," I told him.

"All you have to do is ask." He kissed me then, softly at first. Soon, he was thrusting his tongue in and out of my mouth in the same rhythm as his cock shuttled in and out of my cunt.

The taste of my own juices on his mouth pushed me over yet again. I came harder this time, harder than I ever had. Flecks of light and darkness flashed behind my closed eyelids, and I wrapped my legs around his waist to hold on.

Will must have liked the feel of my walls rippling around him, because he gave two more powerful thrusts, then he held himself deep while his whole body shook.

We lay there wrapped together for several minutes, while our heaving lungs and racing hearts settled down. We were both coated with sweat, and my muscles were limp as yesterday's pasta, but I'd never felt more alive in all my years.

Finally, Will stirred. He untangled my limbs from his and vanished into the bathroom, returning moments later without the condom.

I'd pulled the sheet up over myself and I gazed up at him uncertainly. "You want me to go to my own room now?"

Will laughed and practically dove onto the bed. "Oh, sweetheart, we've only just begun."

Chapter Two

I set the test strip on the counter and stood, making my way back to my bedroom, where I fell back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling.

What to do next?

It was Saturday morning. I'd planned to head into the office and catch up on some reports that I'd been avoiding. I *might* be able to get into the office without running into one of the guys. But I doubted it. There was always somebody working.

My cousins Vaughn and Evan had come up with the concept for Guardian about eight years ago when Vaughn got out of the Marines. The other guys had all been brought in before they opened, but I was a newer member of the team. Now, five years later, there was finally another female at Guardian.

All that was great. I liked Hannah—a lot. She held her own, took no shit from the boys, and never rubbed my nose in the fact that I'm the only one on the team with no formal police or military training. I'd loved being a bridesmaid—I may be a private investigator, but I love pretty dresses and shoes as much as the next girl. I also enjoyed having another woman to talk to.

Except for the part about sleeping with her brother after the wedding. And oh, lord, the whole rest of the weekend. For the next two months, we'd alternated ignoring each other with bouts of wild monkey sex.

I wanted to call Will, I really did. Almost as much as I dreaded it. There was a part of me that truly hoped he'd be thrilled about the baby, declare his undying love, and demand an immediate marriage. But he'd left the country two weeks earlier, slipping out of my bed without a word after a particularly intense night of passion. I hadn't heard from him since. Not the signs of a man desperately in love. He'd been in touch with Rhys, about tech support, and with Vaughn about not needing backup, so I knew he wasn't dead or anything. Which, to be honest, was a possibility that had kept me awake for a few nights. What we did at Guardian wasn't always...safe.

Oh, *shit*. After fighting so hard to get there, to pull my weight at the firm, I was going to have to take myself out of the field, for the next year or so, it looked like. Maybe

permanently. I wasn't sure I could justify risking my life if there was someone else who depended on me. And that meant I was going to have to tell my partners why I wasn't accepting assignments. Soon. I hugged my arms around myself and sighed.

"Get the hell home, Will. We need to talk."

I didn't *think* he could hear me. Most of Will's psychic powers were of the precognitive variety. But I know he'd felt it when his sister had crashed her cop car into a telephone pole last Christmas. So who knew what the hell he was hearing now?

* * * *

Once I'd stopped shaking, I dragged my ass into the shower, threw on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, and walked to the office. I'd chosen the apartment because it was a mere two blocks from Guardian's headquarters. I usually stopped for coffee on the way, but I guess that was going to have to change too. My stomach rebelled at the idea of herbal tea, so I climbed the stairs to our second-floor digs above the coffee shop empty-handed.

"Hey, Carys."

I looked up into the smiling face of my new cousin-in-law, who was perched on top of a file cabinet next to the empty reception desk. Hannah Lightfoot Maddox and I both have black hair, but there the resemblance ends. Her hair is straight, while mine curls maniacally. She's tall, with tan skin, a Marilyn Monroe figure, green eyes, and cheekbones you could cut yourself on. Next to her, I felt even shorter, paler, flatter, and less polished than usual. Which is funny because she was wearing jeans and a San Diego PD T-shirt—not exactly glamorous. The woman would look good even covered in mud.

"Hi, Hannah. Got the Porter case wrapped up so soon?"

She snorted. "Yeah. It didn't take a psychic to figure Mrs. Porter was diddling both the gardener and her tennis coach." She tapped the file she held and shook her head, her long straight hair sliding silkily about her shoulders. "Now it's all on film—digitally speaking—and poor old Mr. P. won't have to cough up millions to be rid of the bitch." Divorce and insurance cases were the bread and butter of a private investigations firm, even if none of us liked it very much. We all took turns dealing with that garbage.

Hannah looked at me again, and her vivid green eyes, so like her brother's, studied me carefully. "You okay? You look...troubled."

I forced a smile. Hannah is psychic like Will. They get it from their Navajo grandfather and Romany grandmother. If I didn't want her to be the first with the news, I'd have to tread carefully. "I'm all right," I said with a shrug. "Just not sleeping well, I guess."

"Hmm. You look like you need a vacation." She gave me a wicked grin. "And I have the perfect solution. Will's in San Alonzo, and he needs some equipment from Rhys. The boys were just arguing about who was going to fly it down to him. You can run the electronics down, then kick back on the beach for a few days afterward."

I plopped into one of the visitor chairs. I'd known Will was somewhere in Central America, but I'd figured he was in the heart of the jungle staking out some drug dealer's compound or something. Not kicking up his heels in the lush, tropical resort city of San Alonzo, bustling capital of the tiny nation by the same name. "Tell me more."

"Hey, honey, did you get... Oh. Hi, Carys. What you doing here on a Saturday morning?"

My cousin Evan is a big bear of a man...literally. I mentioned that everyone in our family is a shape shifter. Somewhere back in the family history, one of my Welsh ancestors did a favour for one of the Fae. He and his descendants were named the guardians of the local faery mound...and were given the power to transform into their spirit animals. Each of us makes the first change somewhere around puberty, and after that, it's a matter of choice. Which animal we favour is different for each of us, but Evan is a huge, shaggy grizzly bear. Judging by the way Hannah's face lit up when he walked into the room, she didn't mind. At least that's something I wouldn't have to explain to Will—he already knew I could turn into a raven. If the guardian gene passed on to the baby, I was pretty sure Will wouldn't freak.

Evan crossed the room and gave Hannah a big wet kiss before taking the file from her hand. I had to fight down a pang of jealousy. I'd never seen my cousin so happy, and I'd give anything to have a guy look at me with the love and passion he directed at her. Okay, only one guy, really. The kicker to this whole thing was that somewhere over the last two months, I'd gone and fallen headfirst into love with Will Lightfoot.

"Just catching up on some paperwork," I replied to Evan's question, even though I didn't think either of them was listening. "Hannah said something about a package that needs delivering?"

"Yeah, Rhys has some toys that Will needs—GPS stuff, mostly. Why? You want to run them down there?"

I hesitated, not wanting to look too eager. This would give me the perfect chance to talk to Will without having to do an end run around the others first. "Yeah, I can do that. Pop down today, come back Monday or Tuesday. I've got a few days coming, might as well spend them somewhere sunny." July in San Francisco was normally gorgeous, but this year it had been mostly damp. We were all feeling the effects of the streak of dismal weather, though I suspected my gloomy mood was mostly due to hormones and lack of sleep.

"Cool." Evan tipped his head towards the stairs. Rhys and his computer labs were in the basement of the old building, beneath the coffee shop. Yale sometimes hung out down there too, though his specialty was blowing things up, not building gadgets. "When can you leave?"

"Give me an hour to pack, get me the case files so I don't step in anything when I get there, and I can be on my way." I stood and moved towards the stairs. "Tell Rhys to bring the package and the file to my apartment, okay?"

"No problem," Hannah said with a grin that didn't quite reach her eyes. She knew something was up, damn it. "Enjoy the beach."

* * * *

On the first leg of the plane ride, I studied the files more than necessary, because it kept me from dwelling on other things. Like little pink plus signs.

I'd already known that Will's assignment involved tracking down the boss of a white-collar crime ring. Electronics smuggling, money laundering, that sort of thing. No sign that La Rosa Blanca was into any of the traditional Central American pastimes of running guns or drugs. But the Feds had their suspicions, and a friend of Will and Vaughn's from their Marine recon days had asked Guardian to do some preliminary research. So Will was down there on a fake passport posing as a businessman looking for investment opportunities—a thinly veiled cover for a drug dealer who'd headed south to avoid the heat.

I was just a tourist, visiting San Alonzo for a few days of sun and fruity drinks. Though in my case, they were going to be straight fruit juice. I'd just happen to run into Mr. William Lee in the hotel somewhere, and invite him back to my room. He could take the package, and I'd never see him again until we were both back home in San Francisco.

That's the way it was supposed to play out, anyway. Only I knew that somewhere in there, Will and I were going to have one hell of a serious talk.

* * * *

I snoozed for a couple of hours over Mexico. Fortunately, I wasn't having any morning sickness or anything—not yet, at least—but I did seem to be god-awfully tired most of the time. It was midnight, local time, when I finally arrived, tired and crabby and annoyed at the cheerfully rude customs officials. But they hadn't taken apart my laptop, printer, or giant-sized hairdryer, so they hadn't found the goodies Rhys had stashed inside for Will. The only real electronics I had with me were my cell phone and PDA—from which the case file had been deleted, somewhere over Belize. Now all the appointments and files were appropriate to a legal secretary on vacation.

The resort city had an active nightlife, so it was no trouble to catch a cab to the hotel. Another hour and a bunch of tips later, and I was checked in and waving away the sweet bell-hop who'd hinted at offering far more personal services than carrying my suitcase. I flopped down on the bed and drew in several deep, slow breaths.

I was exhausted, but I knew I had to find Will. He'd indicated he'd be at the beachfront bar until closing tonight, waiting for whichever partner arrived with the goodies. Wouldn't he be surprised to find it was me? But that meant I had to get up, change my clothes, and leave the comfy softness of my bed behind.

I'd packed a short scarlet slip dress that was perfect for clubbing, and a pair of beaded, high-heeled flip flops. Tossing my jeans and tank top onto the bed, I shimmied into the silky-soft dress, and immediately felt just a little less worn down. There's something about a slinky red dress that brings out the vixen in all of us—even for those of us who were never really vixens to begin with.

I couldn't do much with my hair. I left it loose, curling in a tangled mass down my back. A stripe of bright red lipstick and silver hoop earrings were easy additions, along

with the Celtic raven pendant I almost always wore on a thin silver chain. My folks had given that to me on my fifteenth birthday, not long before they died. I wouldn't have traded it for all the diamonds in Amsterdam.

I fortified myself with a bottle of water from the mini-bar and headed down to the bar, trying to quell the butterflies that were doing the tango in my stomach. Part of me was thrilled just to be seeing Will again after two weeks' absence, but the rest of me was terrified at his reaction to my news.

The beachfront bar was lit with colourful paper lanterns and featured a noisy flamenco band. I dodged a couple of wandering hands and turned down two overt passes as I made my way to the bar. Hopping up on a barstool, I ordered a big slushy fruit drink—virgin of course—making an off-hand remark about jet lag to the bartender to explain the lack of alcohol.

"Hey babe, buy you that drink?" Out of nowhere, Will was there at my elbow, giving me an oily grin.

"Maybe." Flashing him my best coy smile, I made a point of looking down at his hand. "Depends on if you're married."

"Not anymore." He held up his unadorned left hand. "And I keep up my alimony payments, so the ex has no complaints."

"In that case, be my guest." I pointed at the stool to my left. "My name's Carrie. What's yours?" I was travelling on my own passport, but Carrie is a lot less noticeable than Carys, so I usually used it on jobs.

"Bill. Bill Lee." He shook my hand, bowing over it. "Did I overhear that you just arrived?"

We made fake small talk while I sipped my fruit slush, and he slowly worked his way through a light beer. Not Will's drink of choice, but easier to consume in tiny increments than hard liquor, without giving the impression that you're not drinking at all. Finally I set my empty glass down on the bar right next to Will's beer bottle.

"You wanna go for a walk on the beach?" He leered at my chest.

If I hadn't known he was playing a role, I'd have probably slapped him, or at least just walked away. As it was, I batted my eyelashes up at him and sighed. "Sure." I let him help me off my stool and lead me out to the sand, where I slipped off my sandals and held them with my other hand.

We moved silently away from the crowd, our arms twined around each others' waists. When we were a good distance from any other strolling couple, he whispered fiercely in my ear.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Bringing you presents, of course. And nice greeting, by the way. Right up there with, 'hi honey, I've missed you'."

I could practically hear him grind his teeth. Will is about a foot taller than me, so my ear was pressed to his chest just above his nipple. I strongly considered nipping him through his thin cotton golf shirt, just because he was being an ass. And it hurt, damn it. I'd hoped he'd at least be glad to see me before I dropped the bomb.

"Of *course* I missed you." His low growl was more vibration than sound. "But I was expecting Yale or Evan or Vaughn. It isn't exactly safe down here right now."

Mollified, at least a little, I relaxed against his chest and looked out over the ocean, shiny black satin against the matte black velvet of the sky above. The sand was warm beneath my feet, the sound of the surf was rhythmically hypnotic, and even though he was grumpy, the man I loved was holding me close. I sighed and rubbed my head against his pec. God, he smelled like heaven. I could feel my nipples pebbled against the lace of my bra and my tiny thong was already soaked, just from sitting next to him at the bar.

I barely whispered, "Let's take this upstairs," but I knew it was loud enough for Will to hear me.

He turned me to face him, and I felt the heavy press of his erection into my stomach. Thank God he was as turned on as I was. I lifted my face for a kiss, and Will didn't disappoint me. He took my mouth in a hungry clasp that was both thrilling and a little scary. I knew this side of him—we'd worked together long enough for me to know his moods, but he'd never brought that darkness into the bedroom, and lord help me, it was turning me on even more. I twined my arms around his neck and stood on my tiptoes, returning the kiss for all I was worth.

"Jesus!" He shuddered as he wrenched his mouth from mine. He pulled me tighter against his chest and leaned his chin on the top of my head. "Your room. Now."

"Okay." I bent down, fumbling in the sand for the shoes I'd dropped when he kissed me.

Will reached down and scooped up my sandals before I'd even located them. Damn man had the night-vision of an owl. He kept his other arm snugly around me as we walked back up the beach to our hotel, moving a lot more quickly than when we'd left.

"I still can't believe they sent you," he grumbled as I slammed the door to my room shut behind us. "What were they thinking?"

I was still searching for the right words when he kissed me again, rendering any answer impossible. I forgot about everything—the mission, the danger, even what I'd come down here to tell him. All that mattered right now was getting our clothes off, and maybe making it to the bed before he was inside of me.

"Gotta have you." His voice was muffled against the skin of my neck. I have a really sensitive spot right where my neck meets my shoulder, and Will had found it the very first time we'd made love. Even more importantly, he remembered. While he nibbled that spot with lips and teeth, he took hold of the hem of my dress and tugged it up to my waist.

"Will!" I cried out as his hand slid between my legs, tracing the line of my black lace thong. When his fingers ducked underneath the fabric, dipping into the wetness that coated my swollen lower lips, my knees gave out and I sagged against his chest.

"Bed." With no appreciable effort, he lifted me up and strode across the room to the bed in a few swift steps. My jeans and shirt from the flight were still lying on top of the bedspread, but Will just reached down with one hand and yanked the covers aside, sending the other stuff flying. He easily held me with just one arm until he could lower me to the sheet.

Will took a step back, already tugging off his shirt. Meanwhile, I pulled the dress off over my head and leaned back on my elbows to watch the show. He stared at me just as intently while he worked at his belt and the button-fly of his jeans.

God, he was built. Even though this was far from the first time I'd seen him strip, I couldn't have looked away for anything. When he lowered his jeans and boxers, that long, cock of his stood straight out from its sparse nest of crisp dark curls. The plum-shaped head was already a dark purple, and a tiny pearl of pre-cum beaded at the tip.

My pussy clenched at the visible proof of his arousal. No matter how unresolved things were between us emotionally, my body couldn't help responding to the knowledge that I turned him on almost as much as he did me.

He knelt between my legs on the bed and pulled the strings of my thong down my thighs. By the time it was off my ankles, his patience was gone. Burying his face in my wet curls, he licked my slit in one slow, hungry slurp and groaned.

"You taste like fucking heaven." He used one hand to separate my labia, then slid two fingers of the other up inside my waiting sheath.

"Will!" I cried out his name as he suckled my clit. "Please, Will, it's been too long. I need you inside me."

"God, yes," he agreed. "As soon as you come for me, beautiful. I want to see your cream all over my hand and face." With that, he went back to fucking me with his hand and tugging on my clit with his lips.

It didn't take long. I'd been primed since the moment I saw him in the bar. My body had recognised its mate from our very first time together. Sexually, we were a perfect fit. I dug my fingers into the sheets and lifted my hips to bring me closer to that talented mouth, pulsing them in time to the thrusts from his hand. Moments later, my body convulsed and I screamed his name as the tremors quivered through me. Before I was even done coming, he moved, sliding up my body and piercing me with his erection in one smooth motion.

"Yes," I moaned. The penetration of his thick, hot cock evoked another series of spasms in my pussy, and for just a moment, my vision almost faded to black at the intensity of the orgasm. I dug my nails into the skin of his back and held on while he pounded into me. His jaw was clenched tightly and his eyes blazed as he stared into mine, forcing me to maintain eye contact while he fucked me.

"Carys," he gritted out between his teeth, in a voice that was almost a moan. After just a few more strokes, I felt his whole body go taut. He licked his lips and growled, "Mine!" then crashed his lips down on mine, kissing me breathless and dragging another orgasm from my overloaded system. I did black out then, just for a few seconds as I felt the hot splash of his seed filling my core.

"Welcome back."

Will climbed back into bed just as I was opening my eyes. He'd picked up our clothes and dimmed the lights. He stretched out beside me, propped up on one elbow, gazing down into my face.

"You okay?"

I nodded, and somehow dredged up enough energy to pull myself into a seated position with my back against the pillows. Will must have sensed that I wanted to talk seriously, because he sat up beside me and smoothed the covers over both of our laps.

"I'm sorry, Carys," he said, reaching out a hand to toy with the end of one of my curls. "That was — unforgivably irresponsible of me."

"Took two," I managed. My throat was as dry as a Santa Ana wind. "And — it doesn't matter."

He tilted his head, those intense eyes scrutinised me cautiously. "Did you start taking something?" We'd talked about it after the first time we'd slept together. He knew I wasn't on the pill.

I shook my head. This wasn't how I'd imagined having this conversation. Swallowing hard, I forced myself to lift my chin and look into his eyes. "But, Will, this wasn't the first time we forgot protection."

He nodded. The skin around his mouth was taut and his jaw was clenched again. "The night before I left San Francisco."

"Yeah. In the shower." We'd been careful the first time that night, but the second round, in the shower, had been fast and furious and reckless. And the third... "And again when you woke up after that nightmare." It had been a bad one; he'd woken me with what could only be described as a scream. Comfort had quickly dissolved into mindless passion.

"Oh, hell, that's right." He tunnelled the fingers of one hand through his short black hair, and I could see the gears turning in his head as he counted and added up the timing. Finally, with a miniscule tip of his chin, he reached down and took both of my hands in his. "Are you sure?" His gaze bored into mine, fierce, but not threatening.

I nodded, willing away the tears I could feel welling in my eyes.

"Oh, sweetheart!" He pulled me onto his lap and cradled me against his body. His lips moved softly against my hair as he murmured my name over and over.

Snuggling into his warmth, I let the tears come. His hands, big and warm, stroked up and down my spine while he clutched me close to his chest. "Shhhh, sweetheart. It'll be all right. I promise, Carys. Everything's gonna be all right."

When I finally quieted down, I pulled back and looked up into his face, shocked to see that it was tear-streaked, if not as much as my own.

"I'm s-s-sorry." A hiccough punctuated the end of the word.

"Don't be." His voice was shaky and he kissed the tip of my nose. "We'll work it out. But I wish to hell you hadn't had to come down here to tell me."

"I—I wanted you to know first," I admitted. "I was afraid if I waited, someone would figure it out."

"Thank you." This time he pressed a kiss to my forehead. Then he croaked out a rusty chuckle. "Your brothers are going to fucking kill me."

"I'll defend you," I said, trying for a laugh of my own, but it came out as a wheezing snuffle. "Hannah will help."

"I imagine I'll survive their wrath." I snuggled back into his chest and he rested his chin on the top of my head. "As long as the wedding is soon."

"W-w-wedding?" I tried to sound blasé, tried not to show the rush of feverish hope that filled me. "Who s-said anything about a wedding?"

"You *do* want them to kill me then?" His wry attempt at humour was somehow comforting. If Will could laugh, even half-heartedly, then maybe everything would be all right. "Though it will be a toss up on whether they get to me first, or my grandfather. Granddad's kind of a stickler when it comes to responsibility."

I'd met his grandfather at the wedding. Josiah Lightfoot had been a Wind Talker during World War II, and a Los Angeles cop for decades thereafter. Even in his late eighties, he was fierce and imposing. He'd more or less raised Will and Hannah while their archaeologist parents had travelled all over the world, and I couldn't help but be glad he was still hale and hearty, so that my baby would have the pleasure of knowing him. But I saw Will's point. I didn't think a modern kids-first-marriage-maybe-later relationship was going to go over big with the senior Lightfoots, any more than it would with the aunt and uncle who'd taken me in after my parents died.

"So do we meet in Vegas as soon as this mission is over, or do you want the whole formal deal?" The wry grin was back, but it didn't mask the strain that was still in his eyes.

I searched his face for any trace of resentment, and couldn't find any. Still, I didn't know how to respond. It wasn't as if he'd actually proposed, and as much as I wanted to

marry Will, I hadn't wanted it to be for practical reasons. I wanted it to be for love. But that word hadn't been mentioned. Instead I just shrugged and looked away.

"Are you feeling okay?" As that idea occurred to him, he held me away from him and raked his gaze up and down my body. "You're not sick or anything, are you?"

For some reason, that ticked me off—maybe it was hormones, or maybe it was just the emotional roller-coaster I'd been on for the last few days since I'd begun to suspect. "No. I'm not *totally* stupid, you know. If I was having morning sickness, I wouldn't have gotten on a plane. I'm tired, that's all. For some reason, I haven't been sleeping real well."

"I can imagine." He let go of me with one hand to rub his temples and the bridge of his nose. "I'm sorry, Carys. Both for my carelessness and for not being there for you when you first found out. You must have been scared shitless. I shouldn't have left you alone."

"You're doing your job," I told him, mollified by his apology. "And yeah, I was kind of terrified. But now that I've had time to think about it..." I broke off, not sure I should admit to what I'd been about to say next. I really didn't want him to take it the wrong way.

"Yes?" He tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear. "Go on. I think in this situation, we need to know what each other is thinking. I mean, it just occurred to me... You do want to keep the baby, don't you? Not..."

"What?" I pulled back from his arms and glared at him, crossing my arms over my chest. "Of *course* I'm keeping the baby." I'm pro-choice all the way, but I wasn't sixteen or poor or uninsured. I was in a perfectly reasonable position to support a child, with or without Will's help.

"Thank you." Will's shoulders slumped in relief. "So what were you going to say?"

I sighed. Might as well tell him now. I'd blurt it out sooner or later anyway. "I was going to say that now that I've gotten used to the idea, I'm kind of excited about it. I mean I'm thirty-two. I've got to admit, my biological clock is definitely ticking."

"I think..." Will said cautiously. "I think mine has been too. And I can't say I'm entirely thrilled, not just yet, but I don't think I exactly mind, either. What's been going on between us—it was probably always just a matter of when, not if, we made things legal."

Not exactly a declaration of undying love, but as steps go, it was a good one. I relaxed a little for the first time since I'd seen the pink plus sign. And with that relaxation, the crushing fatigue flooded back into me, making me sag back into his chest, yawning.

“Poor thing.” He snuggled me close, then reached out a hand to switch off the remaining lamp. “Get some sleep. We’ll figure it all out in the morning. Right before we get you on the first possible plane out of this hellhole.”

He settled me against his chest, my cheek pillowed on him while his arm wrapped around me. His other hand settled low on my stomach, in a gesture both protective and affectionate that made me snuffle again. It was going to be all right. I drifted off to sleep with that thought running through my mind. Everything was really going to be all right.

Chapter Three

I woke the next morning before daylight, feeling warm and safe and contented for the first time in weeks. Will had me wrapped in his arms, which felt so good I thought I never wanted to move. Except I had to go to the bathroom.

"Good morning," he whispered when I crawled back into bed a few minutes later. "Everything okay?"

"Mmm. It is now." I kissed him, softly at first, then with more and more intensity as we both woke up. His body was hot and hard, his cock ready and prodding against my hip. My own arousal followed quickly. I could feel my pussy swelling and dampening for him, while my nipples were already taut little pebbles rubbing against his smooth chest.

Will kissed his way down my throat, pausing for a moment to nip the tendons of my neck. Rolling me onto my back, he kept his weight on his hip beside me, while his upper body leaned over mine. With one hand, he cupped my left breast, squeezing it softly.

"Are these more sensitive yet?" he asked curiously as he lightly rubbed his thumb across the nipple.

Hell yes. But all I managed out loud was, "Uh-huh." Wanting more, I arched my spine, pushing against his hand.

He squeezed just a little harder, still being exquisitely gentle, while he moved his mouth down to capture the other nipple. I gasped at the thrill of pleasure, then moaned as he began to suck. Wet heat coated the inside of my thighs, and my hips began to move restlessly, seeking more.

"God, you taste like heaven, Carys." He switched his mouth to my other breast, which meant he was leaning all the way across my chest, pressing down on the other with his pecs. I moaned again, then cried out as his big hand moved down. He paused to trace the raven-shaped birthmark on my hip, then brought his hand around to cup my mound. His middle finger slid between my slick labia, pressing lightly on my clit and tickling the mouth of my pussy. I wriggled my hips, trying to drive that finger inside, where I wanted him so badly I ached. Will was in the mood to torment me, though. Instead of delving into my slit, he slipped the finger back up and began to massage my distended clit.

Every part of me was primed that morning. I don't know if it was the pregnancy, or just the two weeks apart, but my body responded like crazy, amazing even me with the degree of reaction to each little touch. I bucked my hips in time to his fingers on my nub, while I clutched his head to my nipple with one hand and dug into his back with the other. I looked down and in the first light of dawn, I saw that dark head against my pale skin. His inky lashes were closed against his cheeks, which hollowed as he suckled me, and I almost came, just from the sight of it.

"More," I gasped out. What he was doing was wonderful, but I still felt empty. He understood and immediately shifted his hand so it was his thumb strumming on my clit, while he penetrated my pussy with one long finger, then two.

"Yes!" I let my eyes flutter shut as I concentrated on the sensations he evoked with his hands and his mouth. No one had ever touched me like Will did. He wasn't my first lover, but he'd so quickly become the best—and the only one who'd ever mattered.

He knew my body as well as I did myself, or maybe better. As the tension coiled in the core of me, he increased the pressure of his mouth and the speed of his hand. My nerves raced towards completion until finally he pressed down with his teeth at the same time as he shoved his fingers deep. I shattered, the waves of pleasure rippling through me from my scalp to my toes.

He immediately slowed his ministrations, gently easing me down just enough. Then he pulled his fingers out, rolled above me and slid his rigid dick into my still-pulsing sheath.

"I assume this is still allowed," he muttered. "I don't have to wait nine months to fuck you again, do I?"

I opened my eyes and gazed up into his, and was surprised by the light-hearted giggle that emerged from my throat. "God, no. In fact, I'd say it's absolutely required." I tightened the muscles of my vagina around him and wiggled my hips side to side. I hadn't had time to do too much research yet, but I'd checked on *that* right away. As long as there were no complications and things didn't get too rough, sex was just fine.

"Thank God," he muttered, pulling almost all the way out before he pushed back in, slow and steady. He kept up that measured pace for a few moments before his control broke and he picked up speed. Since I was still tingling from my first orgasm, it didn't take much to have me climbing again. I wrapped my legs around his waist and my arms

around his back as I eagerly met each of his thrusts. Our bodies, slick with sweat, slid against one another's with delicious friction.

"Will!" I screamed as I crested again, longer and even harder this time, my walls clutching his steely cock.

My climax triggered his and he shouted, "Mine," as he slammed himself deep and spurted ropes of hot wet fluid into my womb.

It wasn't a declaration of undying love, but it was enough. Whether I'd wanted to admit it or not, I was already his, and would have been even if I hadn't been pregnant. Will was my one and only. I only hoped I was his.

Afterward, he lay above me propped on his elbows to spare me his weight. I held on while the slowly diminishing spasms of my pussy milked answering twitches from his gradually softening shaft. He dropped leisurely kisses on my cheeks and forehead and smiled.

"Good morning."

I laughed. "It sure is from where I'm at. Glad it was good for you too."

He grinned at my teasing and kissed the tip of my nose. "Very. Now when's your flight out?"

I scrunched up my face in confusion. "Not until Monday. Why?"

"No." He shook his head and levered his body off mine before sitting up. I tried not to wince at the feeling of loss. "You're leaving today. It isn't safe here."

"What do you mean?" I rolled to my side, watching as he stood and strode to the window. I hadn't pulled the blackout drapes, so only the sheer curtain filtered the golden morning sun which cast a glowing halo around his sharp, stark features. If I'd been an artist, I'd have loved to paint him, just like this, naked in the sunshine.

"I think my cover is compromised," he said. "I was getting close to the centre of La Rosa Blanca, and had a meeting with one of the lieutenants yesterday. Unfortunately, there was another drug dealer from California present at the meeting—a real one. We've crossed paths back home. While I don't *think* he recognised me, the possibility exists. Which means you have got to get out of here. Now."

"Okay." Normally I'd have argued that he needed me here for back-up, but determined as I've always been to pull my weight with the company, even I wasn't crazy

enough to risk the life of my child by getting mixed up with a drug cartel. "Call in your friend from the agency that has no name, and let's get the hell out of Dodge."

He twisted his lips into a half-smile and shook his head. "You know I can't do that. I have one more meeting with them tomorrow. If I can get that GPS tracker and the listening devices planted, Charlie will have all he needs to bring his team in on an official basis."

Charlie was actually Carlos Rivera, who had been on the same special ops team as Will and my cousin Vaughn in the Marines. I'd only met him once, but he'd seemed pretty competent.

"Are they even here?" I nibbled on my lower lip, far more worried about him than I wanted him to know. "Do you have any back-up at all?"

"He's here. He and a handful of his men are supposedly on vacation. They rented a beach cottage just a mile or two up the coast."

"And he knows about this meeting tomorrow, and is going to make sure you survive it?"

"He does." Will kissed me then, distracting me from my worrying. Long moments later, he pulled away with a sigh. "Now, let's see about getting you out of this hell hole."

* * * *

Will refused to let me out of his sight, so after I showered and packed my single suitcase, I walked back to his room with him, so he could shower and change. Then, he was determined to personally put me in a limo to the airport. He'd even called while I was showering, and gotten my flight changed to noon today.

"Charlie is sending one of his guys over to escort you to the airport," Will said. "He'll pick you up at my room in half an hour."

"Fine." I wanted to argue, but there was no point when Will was in this mood. The man had stubborn down to an art form. Besides, disagreeing with someone who had visions of the future was pretty impossible even on a good day. I just wished Will was coming home with me.

When we reached his door, Will leaned my suitcase up against the wall while he pulled his key card out of his back pocket. I stood a few feet behind him, content just to

watch him move. Now that he knew about the baby, even seemed happy about the idea, my whole outlook was lighter, more optimistic. He hadn't yet said he loved me, but I was sure he did. And he had said we were getting married. I hadn't realised just how badly I wanted that commitment until he'd offered it.

I didn't hear or feel anyone behind me until the moment the needle punctured my arm and someone grabbed my hands, holding them behind my back. The world swam in front of my eyes, but as I fell, I saw a man move from another doorway to hold a gun on Will, while another stabbed a syringe into his shoulder. And then there was nothing but darkness.

* * * *

The next thing I remember was waking up in a moving vehicle. There was a lot of engine noise as we bumped along very rough roads—or even tracks. We could be in the middle of the rainforest for all I knew. I couldn't see anything, which caused a moment of panic until I felt the band of cloth tied around my forehead. My wrists hurt where my hands were tied or cuffed behind my back. My feet were asleep, but I soon realised they were bound as well.

Next question. Was Will here too? I focused on blanking out my fear and utilising my senses other than sight. The road noise made it impossible to hear breathing, but I did pick up a few phrases in Spanish from some distance away. That let me know which direction was the front. Good. A small bit of information, but anything could be useful.

Okay, touch. I was lying on my left side, facing the front of the vehicle. I wasn't cramped or squished, so I didn't think I was in a trunk. The surface below me was cushioned, and there was another right behind my hands. Okay, I was on a seat, and it was long enough that I wasn't hitting the end with my head, though I was with my feet. Either a luxury sedan, or a big SUV. Given the road quality, I guessed SUV.

The drug, whatever it was, hadn't disappeared from my system. I tried to stay conscious, to listen in and gather what I could from the men's conversation. But sleep tugged at me, and soon I'd drifted back into the darkness.

* * * *

The next time I woke I was on a much harder surface, except for my head, which was pillowed on...a thigh? My hands and feet were free, too, and I blinked, groaning a little as the harsh sunlight struck my retinas.

"Carys?" Will's voice was a harsh whisper. "You awake, sweetheart?"

"Will?" My eyes adjusted to the sunlight and I looked up at him as he bent over me. The sunlight streaming through a window high on the adobe wall cast a halo around his striking face. "Where are we?"

"I'm not sure. Somewhere in La Rosa's compound, I'm guessing." His eyebrows scrunched together as he studied my face. "How do you feel?"

"Groggy," I admitted. "Whatever they gave us packs a real punch." With Will's help, I slowly managed to sit. "How about you? All in one piece?"

"Nothing that couldn't be fixed by shooting the assholes who grabbed us." I'd never once heard Will this pissed off, and if I hadn't loved him, even I might have been intimidated by the venom in his icy tone. "What about you? Anything hurt?" His gaze flickered down to rest on my stomach, which lurched as I realised that whatever drug they'd given me could have done irreparable damage to the baby.

Now I was furious myself. I paused a moment to take an inventory of my body parts and to examine our tiny prison. The room was about eight foot by ten foot, of crumbling adobe, with a hard packed dirt floor. A wooden cot with a dubious-looking canvas top was pushed against one wall, and a bucket—the sanitary facilities?—sat behind the door. Will had taken up his position in the corner farthest from the heavy wooden door. The only window was a narrow opening at the very top of one wall, maybe ten inches by twenty. It must have faced due south, or close to it, because the full afternoon sun was pouring through the gap. That appeared to be the only source of either light or ventilation in the room.

I checked my wrist, somewhat surprised to find my watch was still there, as was the raven pendant around my neck. It was mid-afternoon, so the sun should be slightly to the west, but mostly south. My purse was gone, which had my cell phone and my passport—getting that back would be a priority after we were free. Both of us were also missing our shoes—probably to make it harder for us to run if we happened to get free.

I looked over at Will, and an oily trickle of dread ran down my spine. His jaw was clenched, he was sweating, and his dark skin had gone nearly white.

"Will, other than the obvious, what's wrong?" Besides the fact that I had to pee, and the thought of using the bucket made me want to hurl.

"You need to get out of here," he said, without unclenching his teeth more than a hair's breadth. "You need to change into your raven form, go out the window, and notify Charlie. As soon as you feel good enough to fly."

"I don't think that's a good idea," I hedged. "We don't know what they want, or anything."

"I'm not suggesting, Carys. I'm telling you, flat out. You. Will. Leave. Now."

I sighed. "I don't think I should. There aren't a lot of females in my family, and nobody's sure about what happens if you shift when you're pregnant." It was one of the hardest things about being the only girl for two generations—nobody to talk to about how the gift reacted with the female physiology. "We know my grandfather's sister lost a baby after shifting, but she was sick before that and didn't live long after, so we're not sure about the causality." Popular opinion had been that she gave up hope and died after losing her husband to tuberculosis, but no one was entirely certain.

"Shit." He buried his head in his hands. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck*." He kicked hard at the cot, shattering one end of it to pieces, even though he was barefoot.

I could see the pulse throbbing in his neck and hear his shallow breathing. The trickle of dread turned into a fucking waterfall. "Will, what do you *know*?"

He swallowed hard, as if he was trying not to throw up. Of course, that thought made me nauseous, too. Finally he shook his head. "I'm sorry. I hate asking you to take the chance, sweetheart. It kills me to think of you risking our baby, but you have to. It's the only option."

"Tell me." I bit hard on my lip to keep both tears and stomach under control.

He inhaled deeply through his nostrils, his lips a thin white line.

"I've seen this place." His voice was so low I almost missed it. I leaned closer to catch his words. "That last night in San Francisco. The dream that woke me up."

"The nightmare." The one that had shaken him so badly I'd been afraid someone was dead.

"Yeah. Worst nightmare ever." He laughed hoarsely and wiped his forearm across his face. Horrified, I realised his eyes were damp. Good gods, Will was crying. "I saw you die, Carys. Three men walked in through that door, right there. One grabbed you, the other two got me cuffed to this wall." He jerked his thumb, and for the first time I noticed an iron ring set into the adobe over his head.

"They doped us with something else—something that kept us from moving, but didn't knock us out. Then they took turns with you, while one of them kept hitting me to make sure I watched."

"Oh, Will!" I went to my knees in front of him. "I'll go, honey. It'll be all right." I hoped to hell I was telling the truth, but Will's visions were never wrong. They could, however, be subverted.

"There's more."

Apparently once he'd started, he needed to get the rest off his chest, though I didn't really want to hear it.

"Go on."

"After they'd all...raped you, they left, laughing, saying they'd be back for more, later. I still couldn't move, couldn't go to you. As soon as I could, I started yanking on the ring, hoping the adobe would give. I could see the tears rolling down your cheeks, and then the blood..."

His voice broke then, but he took a few deep breaths and kept going. "I thought they'd torn something inside you, you were bleeding so badly. Now I think it was the baby. But by the time I yanked the ring out of the wall and got to you..." He took one more shuddering breath as I held him tight. His voice dropped to a ragged whisper, "You were gone."

"Goddess." I clasped him close in my arms, rocking him as we both wept. "I'm so sorry, Will. No wonder you were so freaked out." I couldn't imagine having to watch him bleed out in front of me. And I was sure that he'd been a battered, bloody mess by the time he'd freed himself, which had to hurt, even in a vision. Now I understood why he hadn't been happy to see me when I arrived.

"That's part of why I left so abruptly," he said a few minutes later when we'd both gotten our emotions back under control. "I thought if I just stayed away from you, then it might not happen. I didn't count on you coming to find me."

"Sorry." I kissed his damp cheek, rasping my lips on the black stubble growing in. "I'm going. Promise."

I moved to stand, to start taking off my clothes, but he stopped me with a kiss, so loving and sweet I almost started crying all over again.

"Be very careful," he whispered. Then he unfolded himself from the floor and stood, drawing me with him. He touched my abdomen with the palm of his hand. "We're both depending on you."

"I'll fly due east to the coast, then up the coast to find Charlie. Do you have an address, or a description of the house?" While I was talking, I unzipped my khaki Capri pants and dropped them to the floor.

As I stripped off the rest of my clothes, Will described the house and its location in enough detail that I thought I could find it from the air. "Tell him I've activated my GPS tracker—then you won't have to lead them here." He took off the big, gaudy ring he'd been wearing as part of his salesman cover and pressed something on the inside of the crown before putting it back on.

I stood before him, stark naked, and unclasped the chain of my raven necklace. "Hang onto this for me," I told him. Going up on tiptoes, I fastened it around his neck. "Don't let them kill you before the cavalry gets here."

He hugged me so tightly I could barely breathe, but I didn't care.

"Remember that we're officially engaged," he murmured as he slowly, reluctantly let me go. "Just in case anything...happens."

I swallowed and nodded. Will picked up my clothes and leaned back against the door.

Just before I changed, I whispered the words I couldn't hold in any longer. Just in case. "I love you, Will."

Then I closed my eyes and let the magic do its thing. Moments later, I looked up at Will from my eighteen-inch height and squawked.

His laugh was rusty, but his smile was blindingly beautiful. "I love you too, Carys. Stay safe."

I croaked my agreement, then fluttered up to the window. The sun was to the south, so east was easy to find.

“You’re gorgeous, you know. Even as a bird.” Will had never seen me shift before, and I fluffed my feathers in pleasure at his words. I’m a medium-small raven, with a hooked beak and black with a snow-white breast. I like to think I’m sleek and graceful, but some people still think ravens are nasty scavengers. I was glad Will didn’t.

With one last look at my fiancé—my heart leapt at the word—I flew off into the rainforest.

Chapter Four

The closer I got to the ocean, the more I could smell it. Soon that became a better trail marker than the sun. The cartel's compound had been maybe thirty miles into the rainforest, so it took me a while to fly all the way to the coast. The whole way, I kept thinking about Will, remembering the look on his face as he'd said he loved me. I'd never been so happy or so scared in my life. I had to get help to him in time. I just had to.

Based on the position of the sun, I guessed it was two or three hours before I flew up the coast from the city to spot the purple house with the pink seahorses painted on the blue shutters. And this was supposed to be undercover? As I got closer, I saw that there was a lot of activity in the driveway of the rental cottage. Two muddy looking Jeeps were being packed up by some very competent looking men and women. I flapped closer yet and realised two of the men were my cousins, Evan and Vaughn. Hannah came out of the house carrying a box that looked suspiciously like weapons and set it in the back of one of the Jeeps.

"I tried calling both their cell phones again," she said to Evan, who tied the box down with bungee cords. "I think we need to hurry."

I dove downwards, croaking loudly. They all looked up, my cousins with relief, and the others with confusion. Ravens weren't exactly a local species. One of the men raised a gun.

"No!" Vaughn wrenched the gun out of the agent's hands. "We'll explain later. Don't shoot."

I landed on his shoulder, panting with exertion, and leaned against his shoulder-length black hair. Birds have a fast metabolism, using up lots of energy when they fly, and I hadn't stopped to eat anything along the way. I'd also flown at pretty much top speed the whole distance and hadn't been in great shape when I started. In other words, I was exhausted.

Hannah and Evan followed Vaughn as he strode into the house with one hand cupped around where I perched on his broad shoulder. My cousins are both big men,

good looking and tough, and they're all ridiculously protective of me—the youngest and the lone female in their midst. Today, I didn't mind that a bit.

We went into an office of sorts, where Evan glared down the other men until only one was left. Twin beds were pushed up against the wall piled with miscellaneous gear, and computer equipment sat on two mismatched desks and a folding table.

I'd met Charlie Rivera before, so I knew this was he. I flew into a corner behind a dresser and changed. I'm so short, only the top of my head showed above it when I straightened.

"Can somebody toss me something to wear," I asked. Then I grabbed the cabinet as my knees wobbled. "Whoa. And a chair."

Evan's shirt came sailing over the dresser top. He was the biggest of the bunch, which meant his shirt came all the way to my knees. I pulled it on and buttoned it up, then stepped out from behind the furniture and sank into the computer chair Charlie had just vacated.

"They've got Will," I said, trying and failing to catch my breath. "He said...his GPS...is activated..." Black spots swam in front of my vision, something that had never happened to me before.

"We've got the signal," Charlie assured me. "That's why we were getting ready to move out." He shook his head and grinned at Vaughn. "So different species, huh? Haven't seen anything like that since Afghanistan." That's right—Charlie had seen Vaughn change in the military. I thought I'd heard that story before, but it didn't matter now. Vaughn's a panther, very good at sneaking around in the darkness and gathering information.

"We're all different," Evan rumbled. "And if you don't want a pissed off grizzly bear in your house, stay on the subject."

Charlie shot him a laughing salute. "What can you tell us about the compound, Carys?"

"There are maybe ten buildings," I told him. I'd done a brief fly-around before I'd taken off. I described what I'd seen with a tongue that barely seemed to work. Instead of catching my breath, I was having more and more trouble breathing.

Finally, Charlie nodded, satisfied that I'd told him everything that would help. He cocked one eyebrow at me. "Are you coming with us?" If I hadn't been in love with Will,

I'd have found his suave, Hispanic good looks attractive, but right now he was just someone who could help.

"No." I tried to shake my head and saw more black spots. "I—I can't."

"Flying tires them out," Vaughn added. My oldest brother Gavin was a hawk, and between us, we'd managed to convince the others of that much at least. "You should remember that."

I looked at my cousins, trying hard to ignore the tightness in my chest and lightness in my head. "Why...are you...here?"

"My grandfather had a funny feeling this morning," Hannah said. "When he couldn't reach Will, he called me. We chartered a plane and came as soon as we could. Honey, are you all right?"

Just then a sharp pain cut through my belly, and I felt moisture on my thighs. *No!* Helplessly I looked up at Hannah. "I think...having...miscarriage." I fell over sideways, clutching my stomach.

One of my cousins caught me, and I heard Charlie yell, "Hope, get your ass in here *right fucking now!*" just before I passed out.

* * * *

I came around slowly, but without the discomfort of the last time. My eyes didn't want to open, so I lay there, listening and feeling what was around me, like I had earlier in the SUV—and I'd seen two big black ones on my way out, so I knew my logic had been correct.

This time I was on a bed, with blankets over me. I could smell the spices of Hispanic cuisine, but not from the same room. In here, I smelled tropical flowers and heard the sound of soft native flute music.

A warm, soft hand picked up one of mine, chaffing it gently. "Carys? Are you awake?"

Suddenly all the memories flashed into my brain and I cried out, throwing my free hand down over my abdomen.

"Your baby is safe," the voice said. "So are you. Think you can open your eyes for me now?"

I blinked and managed to separate my stuck-together lashes. The woman sitting beside the bed was smiling at me with comforting warmth in her serene expression. She was beautiful, with high cheekbones, full lips and big brown eyes. Her copper-brown hair waved softly to her waist, and I wanted to hate her on sight, except she'd just said the one thing in the world I most wanted to hear.

"I'm Hope Rivera," she said, anticipating my question. Her accent was pure southern California. "Or Esperanza, if you ask my grandmother. I'm Charlie's sister, and the resident medic for this misbegotten crew. We caught everything in time, *pobrecita*, and both you and the baby are going to be just fine."

"How...?" I didn't see any tubes or machines, or other hospital-type equipment. "How can you be sure?"

Her smile twisted into a warm, wry grin. "You have your gifts, I have mine. I can't fly, but I can heal." She shrugged her shoulders, as if to say I should believe it or not, my choice. If I was surprised that she knew about the Maddox shifting abilities, it didn't register until later.

"You—healed me?" I didn't understand it, but I wasn't going to argue with a gift from the gods—I'd have fought every demon or devil I could think of, or kissed their asses to save my child. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. They weren't going to let me go on the extraction mission anyway. As an empath, it's hard for me to be around the fighting."

"That crew? I'm constantly amazed that even Hannah gets to go. Talk about a bunch of male chauvinists." I moved to sit up against the headboard, and instantly, Hope was there, putting a fluffy pillow behind my back.

"Oh they tried to leave her here, on communications duty." Hope's big brown eyes danced merrily, then narrowed. "I thought she was going to throw a chair at your cousin Vaughn. That one is the worst, I think."

"You haven't met my brother Gavin," I told her, rolling my eyes. "Or Will. When I first joined Guardian, he spent months yelling at me every time I tried to take a field assignment." I stifled a sob, wondering what they'd done to Will when they came in and found me missing. How would he explain that?

"They'll get him back." She patted my hand. "It's what they do, and they're the best. Plus they have your family to help. I'm sure a grizzly bear and a panther come in handy in a fight."

"Yeah." I leaned aback against the pillows. I didn't hurt anywhere, but I had all the energy of a half-drowned kitten.

Hope brought me a plastic cup of water, which helped somewhat. I handed her back the empty cup and asked. "So this healing—how does it work?"

"I don't know. How do you explain your shape shifting? I just know what needs to be fixed when I touch someone, and I can visualise it happening. In your case, you were too fatigued, and there was a drug in your system making things worse. I convinced your body to reject the drug, repaired the dehydration damage in your uterus, and managed to infuse some fresh energy into you so your body quit trying to miscarry. It was enough, but you're going to be a little weak for a couple of days."

I looked at her then, noticing the lines around her eyes and mouth. "Energy from you. Thank you, Hope." I owed her more than I could ever repay.

"No problem," she said. "It's what I do. I recover it very quickly."

"How did you end up down here with your brother?" I figured Charlie was just as bad as the rest, wanting to keep the women safe at home.

"I was already down here, visiting relatives when Charlie showed up. I had this weird feeling I might be needed, so I stayed, despite his objections."

"Well, I'm so glad you did." I yawned and blinked. "How long was I asleep?"

"Only about forty-five minutes," Hope said, nibbling at her lower lip.

"The compound wasn't that far away," I said worriedly. "They should be there by now."

"They didn't leave until they were sure you were okay," Hope said. "So they've been gone maybe half an hour."

Were any of them coming back? Fresh nausea rolled in my stomach.

Hope stood. "Wait right there. I'll go see what's up in the office-slash-communication room."

"Thanks." I'd have gone with her, but I didn't know if I had the strength to stand, and I didn't want to undo her hard work.

She returned a few minutes later, a guarded smile on her face. "They're almost there. If you think you want to listen in, you can come with me."

I realised as I swung my legs out that I was still wearing nothing but Evan's shirt.

Hope chuckled, then opened a drawer and handed me a pair of cotton pyjama pants. They were way too long, but I just rolled them up. Then, I let her help me stand, grateful that everything seemed to be in working order. I only had to lean on her a little as we made our way down the hall, with a brief stop at the bathroom. The rental beach house had maybe five bedrooms, which made me wonder how many had gone on the mission.

"Charlie's team has five men, other than himself," she told me. "Usually they leave one behind for communications – that's Ernie, you'll meet him in a minute. So five of them plus your three cousins." We walked into the office, at the far end of the hall from the room I'd been in and she introduced me to a lanky young man with freckles, sandy hair and a strong southern accent.

"Pleased to see you on your feet, ma'am." He handed each of us headsets. "I've turned off the mics on those so you can hear, but we won't distract them with our conversation."

Hope sat in the other chair while I found an empty corner on one of the beds.

"We've parked now," I heard Charlie say over the headset. "We're circling the compound on foot, looking for ways in."

"Guards at the rear gate are out," another man said a few minutes later.

Ernie typed rapidly on the computer in front of him. "Alarms and security cameras are down."

"There's a group of them gathered around a central courtyard." That was Vaughn. "I'm going in closer."

There was a rustle from his microphone, and I knew he was changing into his cat form. We wouldn't hear any more from him directly, but he could sneak up on almost anyone in that shape.

"Okay, front gate is clear." Hannah's voice was soft and deadly. "I'm going in first. I think there's another guard in the gatehouse up ahead."

"Right behind you, babe," Evan said.

"We've got a hole in the south fence. Two more going in."

Then came the sound of gunfire—four sharp retorts. “Two bad guys down, good guys fine,” Charlie whispered.

“They’ve got Will tied to a post in the courtyard,” Hannah whispered. “He doesn’t look conscious, but they’re still whipping him. I’m going in—Vaughn already did.”

“Men, do not, I repeat, *do not* shoot the panther or the grizzly bear,” Charlie ordered. Screams, curses, and the sounds of machine guns crackled over the headset.

“Falco is down,” came a frantic voice. “Looks like a leg wound.”

“I’ve got three of the cartel bigshots holed up in a corner,” said another man. “Bridger’s getting them cuffed.”

“I’m cutting Will down from the pole. Evan and Jake are providing covering fire.” Hannah was short on breath. “He doesn’t look good at all, but he’s still breathing. We need to get him out of here ASAP.”

My heart almost stopped beating in my chest. Hope scooted her wheeled office chair close to the bed and took my hand as we listened in frantic silence.

“Allen is down,” another man said brokenly. “Head shot. He’s gone.”

Ernie bit his lip and turned away, but not before I saw his hazel eyes fill with tears.

Finally, there was no more gunfire.

“I think that’s all of them.” Evan sounded both tired and pissed.

“Hang in there, Nick. We’ll have you to a medic in no time flat.”

“Load the prisoners in one Jeep, the wounded in another,” Charlie barked out orders. “Who’s hurt?”

“Seriously? Only Nick Falco and the guy we came to get. Bridger’s got a graze on his arm, and the big guy caught some flying debris, but he’s fine.”

“Colonel? Which Jeep do you want us to put Allen in?”

“Fuck.” Charlie’s voice cracked. “I’ll have to take the body to the consulate. Put him in the back seat of my Jeep, throw the assholes in the back, trussed up like Christmas geese. Marco, you’re with me. The rest of you head back to the house and get Hope to take care of the wounded.”

“Vaughn, can’t you drive this thing any faster?” Hannah asked, maybe ten minutes later. “Will’s pulse isn’t good at all. Both of these guys have lost way too much blood. And why aren’t we heading to the nearest hospital?”

"La Rosa's got people in the local hospitals," one of the men answered. "The organisation is much bigger than we'd originally thought."

"The good news is the three we've got are all wanted in the US—so the consulate will hold them while extradition is being sorted out," Charlie replied.

For another fifteen or twenty minutes, I just held Hope's hand and listened. Finally, Vaughn's voice crackled over the link.

"We're coming in fast. Ernie, get your ass off the radio and out to the carport to help carry the wounded. Hope, get fuelled up and ready to go. We've got two critical. Five minutes."

"Guess it's a damn good thing I let you stay." Charlie came on and added, "We're pulling into the consulate now. I'll call when I have any intel."

Ernie stood and left the room with Hope close behind. They waited out in the carport, while I sat rigidly beside the living room window, with my lip caught between my teeth until the car rolled into the drive.

As soon as the vehicle stopped, Evan hopped out of the back, leaned back in, and lifted out Will's limp, bloody body. Most men couldn't have carried Will's weight, but even when he's human, Evan retains a lot of his grizzly bear strength.

Hope hurried ahead and held open the door. "Carys, take him to the room you were in," she called.

I started down the hallway, hating to turn my eyes from Will, even long enough to lead the way. Out of the corner of my vision, I saw Vaughn and Ernie carry in the other man, but I kept moving, though my pace was still frustratingly slow. Even while I cursed the weakness, I was glad Hope had held some of her own energy in reserve for the injured men.

I pulled the sheet and blanket down, then sat on a small chest in the corner of the room. Evan laid Will face-down on the queen-sized bed and stepped back, next to me. Hope rushed in, followed by Hannah. Hope immediately went to Will's side, while Evan and Hannah stood on either side of me, each wrapping a comforting arm around my shoulder.

Will was a mess. He was shirtless, and the skin of his back hung in bloody shreds. Several wounds had been sutured with butterfly bandages, but still oozed badly. Huge black and purple bruises covered his face, arms and torso, while small red sores dotted the

soles of his feet. Cigarette burns? Even from where I sat, I could see his breathing was too slow and too shallow. Droplets of blood bubbled from the corner of his mouth. I tried to move forward, to go to him, but Evan and Hannah held me back. Vaughn slipped into the room and stood next to Hannah, his arms crossed over his chest.

"I'm just going to heal the worst of it now," Hope warned. "Once he's stable, I'll go take care of Nick. Then I can heal them bit by bit until they're well."

We all nodded and I bit back a sob. Hope sat next to Will's battered form and took his hand in hers. Then she closed her eyes. A soft amber glow seemed to surround both of them, and though I couldn't see any change in the external injuries, I saw Will's breathing ease and a little colour came back into his face as the bleeding slowed, then stopped.

"Okay. He shouldn't wake up, and don't try. I've fixed his broken ribs and the punctured lung, then helped kick start the production of new blood. That's going to have to do for now." I could see the exhaustion lining her face. She looked at Hannah. "Meanwhile, if one of you wants to change the sheets and clean his back, that would help. Then you might want to clean those cuts on your husband's face. Down here, even minor wounds get infected awfully fast."

Evan stepped over to the bed and helped her rise. "They'll heal as soon as I get a minute to shift. Don't worry about me."

"Good."

Vaughn walked her out of the room, while Evan and Hannah made short work of washing and bandaging Will's wounds. They changed the sheets on the far side of the bed, shifted him to the clean one, then changed the other side. Fortunately, there was a plastic mattress cover underneath, so the mattress wasn't ruined. They wiped that clean as well. I was impressed, even though I wished they'd let me help. As soon as they were done, I immediately moved over to the empty chair beside the bed.

Not wanting to risk waking Will, I didn't touch him, but I lay my hand on the covers just an inch or so from his. Evan kissed Hannah on the cheek, said he'd be right back, and slipped out as well.

"So does he know about the baby?" Hannah stood next to me, putting her hand on my shoulder.

I nodded. "He was happy about it, I think. Before he sent me for help, he said to tell everyone we were engaged."

"I imagine so," Hannah had that same wry grin as her brother. Seeing it, I blinked back tears. "Though having the Maddox boys beat him up seems kind of redundant right now."

I nodded again, barely looking up when Vaughn and Evan slipped back into the room.

"How about you, shrimp? You doing all right?" Vaughn finally said. "What's-her-name said you would be, but it was harder than hell to ride out of here before you came around."

"I'm fine," I assured him. "We're fine."

"Oh, hell." Vaughn shook his head, his black hair tumbling around his shoulders. "I still don't even want to contemplate that. I mean we all knew you two had something going—"

"You did?" I should have known we couldn't keep it a secret in a family of psychics and men who used scent as a targeting sense.

"Yeah," Hannah agreed. "Ever since the wedding, the tension between you two has been different."

"I'm not going to even ask why you got involved in an operation, given the circumstances," Evan growled. "But it looks like Guardian now has a full-time profiler who isn't allowed out of the office."

"Yeah." I didn't care about any of that, as long as Will survived.

His hand shifted, touching mine. When his fingers curled around mine, I let them, grateful for both the touch and that one small sign of life.

I don't know how long passed. Charlie and the other men returned and filled everyone in on the arrest of the three kingpins. Someone stuck a bottle of water in my hand and I drank it. Vaughn, Evan, and Hannah moved in and out of the room, and at one point, Hope stepped in and made me eat a bowl of *posole*, a thick soup with shredded pork, beans, and hominy, along with a couple fresh tortillas. She checked Will again, and I saw some of his wounds actually close under her fingertips. By the time she was done, he was still pretty messed up, but it was all on the surface. His complexion was back to normal, and his rest appeared to be a natural slumber. Hope, on the other hand, was ashen, her face tightly drawn.

"Sit down before you fall," Vaughn snapped as she stood and swayed. He moved to intercept her on the way to the door.

"I will," she spit back. She turned to Hannah and me with a wan smile. "He should sleep through the night. If you can bandage up the superficial wounds, I can deal with them in the morning. Charlie's guys are doing the same for Nick."

"Got it covered," Hannah assured her. "Anything else I can do to help?"

"Keep all these he-men from killing each other while I crash?" She stepped shakily to the door, and didn't even protest when Vaughn picked her up halfway there. "Goodnight, everyone." She laid her head on his chest and let him carry her from the room.

"Well, we're going to go get some sleep too," Hannah told me, after she and Evan finished covering the cuts on Will's skin. "We claimed the pull-out couch in the living room. Come get us if you need us."

"Try and get some sleep yourself," Evan added. He gave me a one armed hug. "See you in the morning."

"I will," I answered. If I could.

After I turned the light off, I crawled into bed beside Will, moving as cautiously as I could. No way would I be able to sleep anywhere else, and he seemed to gain some comfort from touching me. If I stayed away too long, his hand would begin to move restlessly until he found mine.

It was over, I reminded myself as I lay there shaking and trying not to sob out loud. The horror of the day was finally over, and we'd all survived. Once I was through crying, I finally fell into an exhausted slumber.

I woke this time, knowing exactly where I was. Will was pressed up against my back, his arms were around me and his lips were nibbling my ear. "Wake up, beautiful."

I rolled over to look at him. "Will! You're awake."

"Observant, isn't she? How are you, sweetheart?" He leaned up on one arm and ran his other hand over my face and down my side. "A few hours after you left me, I felt...something awful. But Hope says everything is okay."

"When did you talk to Hope?" I scrunched up against the pillows, so I wasn't flat on my back. A quick look at his shoulders and chest showed nothing but pink, healing tissue. Apparently Hope had also finished the job.

"She was in here about an hour ago. You slept right through it, but she caught me up a little bit." A spasm of pain crossed his face before he turned it away. "I heard one of Charlie's men was killed."

"You know it can happen in this line of work," I reminded him. "Even if we hadn't been captured, they'd have had to go in and take down the bad guys sooner or later."

"I know." He sighed, then turned back to examine me. "But you're okay, and so is the baby, right?"

"Thanks to Hope. It was pretty close, I think." I didn't even like remembering that moment of fear when I felt the bleeding start.

"I could feel your pain," he said. "Then it just went blank. I was terrified." He reached up to his neck and took my raven necklace off, then put it back on me. "You know I'm going to lock you in a tower for the next eight months, right? Maybe longer."

"Only if I get to do the same. You felt something, but I *saw* you when Evan carried you in here yesterday. That's not a moment I'm going to forget either."

"I know." He smoothed my hair, leaned over to kiss my lips. "I love you, Carys. I didn't even know how much until I thought my nightmare was coming true. I don't want to live the rest of my life without you."

"I love you, too. And the same goes." I sniffled back a sob.

"Carys Branwen Maddox, will you marry me? Not because of the baby—though that's a bonus—but just so we can spend our lives together?" His eyes glittered as they gazed into mine.

"Of course I will." I launched myself into his arms and we held each other tight. "You really don't mind about the baby?"

"Not a bit," he whispered into my ear. "You think she'll be a shifter or a psychic?"

"She? Is that just a guess, or do you know something you're not telling me? And I have no idea about the other. Maybe both. Wouldn't that be fun to try to keep up with?"

"Just a guess. No visions, no real preference. Just more love than I ever knew existed."

Epilogue

We kept the wedding small, opting for quick rather than big. Both our families were there, of course, along with Hope and Charlie Rivera, and a few other friends and colleagues. We held the ceremony on the beach at Big Sur, with the wind blowing and the sun shining, then booked a banquet room at a seaside restaurant for the reception. Honestly I didn't care where we tied the knot, as long as we got it done before Will took off on another assignment. His wounds had all been healed before we left San Alonzo, but it had taken him a week or so to get back in top condition. We'd both taken several days off, and once we'd gotten back to San Francisco, we'd spent most of that long weekend in bed.

Now it was three weeks later, and after a short reception, we waved goodbye to our families and friends and took off for a week on the beach—this time in Monterey. Neither of us felt like flying anywhere again. After we arrived at our hotel, Will carried me over the threshold into our suite and we fell together onto the bed, ignoring our luggage, the cold non-alcoholic champagne, and even the gorgeous sunset we could see through the French doors to our balcony.

His kiss was deep and sweet, but full of all the same hunger and desire I was feeling for him. Our families had kept us apart last night, and the last two days had been so busy we'd barely seen each other.

"I love you, wife," he said when we stopped to breathe. His green eyes glittered like dew-covered leaves as he looked down at me.

"Love you back, husband." I smiled up at him and ran one finger along his cheek. "Now why do we have so many clothes on?"

"A very good question, Mrs. Lightfoot." He untied the straps of the halter-top sundress I'd changed into for the drive, then lowered the fabric to my waist. "Mmm. The brochure was right. The view in here *is* incredible."

"Couldn't agree more." Mostly because I'd just finished unbuttoning his Hawaiian print shirt and pushing it off his shoulders. He had a few thin scars from his stab wounds

in San Alonzo, but they didn't detract from the masculine beauty of his smooth, sculpted chest. Playfully, I leaned up and nipped his shoulder. "Hurry up."

"Fine." He laughed, scooping me up off the bed and over one shoulder while he pulled down the covers. Then he dumped me back on the bed, peeling off my dress and panties as he went—though he did take just a moment to admire the white lace thong before he removed it. Finally, he slipped my sandals off my feet. Once I was sprawled naked on the sheets, he stepped back and made quick work of his jeans and sneakers.

I licked my lips at the sight of my warrior, so strong and proud, beside the bed. He stepped up slowly, the confident swagger of a predator claiming his mate. His cock thrust forward, hard and ready, and I spread my legs farther, already wet and craving him.

"You're finally mine," he said, as he knelt between my legs. He kissed me hard, then trailed his lips down to my breasts. His tongue laved each one until the peaks were hard and aching. They were starting to get bigger, and were so sensitive now, I nearly came.

"I've always been yours," I said breathily. "You just took a while to figure it out."

"Yeah, I'm a little slow like that," he said. He took one hand and used it to rub the tip of his penis around my pussy, coating it in my cream and teasing the swollen folds.

"Slow can be good," I said, lifting my hips to meet him. I wanted his length inside me more than I wanted to breathe. "But fast can be fun too."

"You want it fast?" He straightened his spine to kiss me on the mouth again. The cool air on my wet nipples made them tingle. "I can give it to you any way you like." His cock prodded at my entrance.

"Just give it to me then," I demanded. "Soft and slow, hard and fast, it doesn't matter..." I broke off and gasped as he filled me, sliding easily into my wet heat. My walls clutched at him, drawing him deeper. "Just as long as it's you."

"Always," he promised as he began to move.

I smiled up at him, canting my hips to meet his thrusts. "Yes, my love. Always."

About the Author

Cindy Spencer Pape has been, among other things, a banker, a teacher, and an elected politician, though she swears she got better. She does volunteer work in environmental education, when she can fit it in around writing. She lives in Michigan with her husband, two teenage sons, a dog, and a lizard, both of which are easier to clean up after than the three male humans.

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