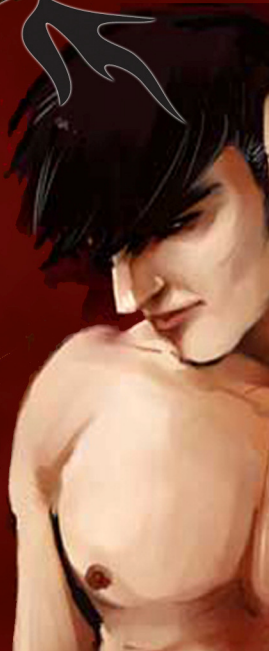


In Their Own Skins II:

THE MARK OF CAIN



KIERNAN KELLY



In Their Own Skins 2: The Marc of Cain

By Kiernan Kelly

Prologue *Five Years Ago*

Darkness fell, deep purple shadows darkening almost imperceptibly to black. Insects, protected by the inky curtain of night, struck up their chorus of chirps and buzzes from their hiding places in the tall grass and thick underbrush of the forest. Birds settled into their nests, small animals in their burrows. Most of the fauna of the forest slept, unaware that death moved on silent feet through the dark. A few others, the nocturnal creatures, felt the shift in the natural order and headed away unnerved to find safer areas to feed.

Two elongated, reptilian heads bobbed in tandem, a sprinkling of feathers along the tops of their skulls swaying gently with the motion, powerful legs moving stealthily through the brush. They walked side by side, stopping often to scent the air for prey. Nostrils flaring, they caught the scent of something large and warm-blooded nearby.

As if by unspoken agreement they veered from one another, quietly moving one to each side of a small copse near the edge of a broad meadow.

The buck fed well that day, grazing on the fresh spring grass in the meadow, and had returned to the thicket he'd claimed as his own. He stood in the small area, surrounded on all sides by a natural screen of bushes and brambles, sniffing the air, unable to rest. Something didn't smell right. There was a tang in the air that didn't belong, something odd and threatening, outside his realm of experience. His large, spoon-shaped ears twitched, swiveling first in one direction and then the other, straining to hear anything that might signal danger. He was skittish, his instincts keeping him on edge. He stood with his muscles tensed, ready to spring away at the slightest movement or sound.

He never got the chance.

The attack came without warning in a frenzy of snapping jaws and slashing claws. Two creatures, attacking from opposite sides of the thicket in a perfectly coordinated assault, made short work of the hundred sixty pound deer. Twin roars rolled throughout the forest, startling birds into flight and instantly silencing the insect population.

Although they were young, no more than thirteen years old, they were nearing their full physical potential. Like their sire, they were precocious shifters, coming into their power before they'd turned two years old; Gar started their training shortly afterward. Back home in the Everglades, the pair of velociraptors were already the deadliest beasts in the swamp, trained since birth to hunt as a single, cohesive unit, and every other living creature in the area knew it. When the raptors hunted, everything else hid -- or got eaten. Not even the predators who usually ruled the wetlands -- gators, bobcats, bear, snakes, and owls -- dared remain in the open.

Here in the forest of north central Florida, miles from their usual haunts, their scent was unfamiliar to the other denizens of the woods. It was enough to make their prey wary, but not enough to cause a panic.

Yet.

That would change relatively quickly. The more the pair hunted in this area, the scarcer and more difficult to track their prey would become. Animals were not stupid. They quickly added the scent of raptor to their list of creatures best avoided, and would vacate the area in a panic as soon as they scented the deadly reptiles. All too soon, the raptors would need to move on, to find new hunting grounds elsewhere.

For now, they feasted.

They'd already nearly reached their full physical potential. At five feet tall and nearly fifteen feet long from their snouts to the tips of their long serpentine tails, both came equipped with a mouthful of long, wickedly sharp teeth and an elongated, curved, retractable claw on each hind foot. The weapons nature granted them helped to swiftly bring their prey down. Though they might grow another foot in height and up to five more in length, already there was nothing quite like them anywhere on the face of the planet -- anymore.

They'd been told their sire, Cain, a tyrannosaur-shifter, had been much, much larger and three times as fierce. The earth shook with each footstep he took, and nothing in his path drew breath for very long if he was hungry.

His great size was both his advantage and his downfall. He wasn't graceful; he was incapable of maintaining speed, powerless to camouflage himself because of his size, and he hunted alone.

Not so them. They were quick, smart, and so finely attuned to one another that it sometimes appeared they were two manifestations of the same creature. By the time they reached adulthood, nothing in nature would be able to stand against them. If they could catch it, they could eat it.

They hunted as often as possible, both to gain skill and to assuage the almost constant hunger gnawing at their bellies. Contrary to popular science, they weren't cold-blooded like their rivals in the swamps, the alligators. Their metabolisms were fast, and needed large amounts of fuel to work efficiently. *Reptile* was actually a misnomer; they were more closely related to birds. Their bones were hollow and light, enabling them to move swiftly. They were as warm-blooded as any of the mammals they hunted, and needed to eat regularly and often to thrive.

Watching the carnage from a distance, Gar smiled, leaning back against the driver's side door of the primer gray-and-blue, dented and scratched Ford pick-up, and waiting patiently for the two teens to finish their dinner. Twenty minutes later, two naked young

youths, identical from their midnight-black hair to the soles of their feet, walked out of the forest and up the small hill to where he stood. Their faces and bodies were splashed with blood that looked black in the darkness.

"What are the three rules?" Gar asked the twins.

"Eat. Dominate. Propagate," they answered dutifully, their voices blending seamlessly in a harmony so perfect they were barely distinguishable from one another.

"What are you?"

"We are the Ultimate Predators. We are gods."

"And what is everyone else?"

"Food."

"What are the rules?"

Four eyes rolled and two chests heaved with the sort of heavy sighs only teenagers could effectively manage as they obediently droned the required answer. Although they looked as different as night and day, the twins seemed to share one mind that -- as was usual -- seemed bent on driving Jax crazy. "Watch out for each other. Stay alert. Never wander beyond the perimeter fence."

"Never *ever* wander beyond the perimeter fence," Jax corrected. He ground his molars, trying to keep his patience with his niece and nephew. What did he have to say to them to make them understand that all the precautions, all the rules, were only for their own protection? Nothing he said seemed to sink into their heads, not anymore. When they were younger, they'd taken his word as gospel, always eager to please, but it was as if the moment they hit their teens their brains leaked out of their ears, replaced by a big, fat wedge of stubborn surliness. "There are enemies out there," he said, pointing off toward the distance, where the fences stood between the Shifting Sands Ranch and the outside world. "They look like you and me, until they shift. By the time you realize they've changed, you've already been gutted. Is that what you want?"

"No, Uncle Jax," the twins replied in identical, listless monotones.

"There are plenty of humans out there, too. They can't shift but they have guns, knives, and can take you out just as quickly as a mouthful of teeth or sharp claws. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Uncle Jax." Drones. They sounded like robots who replied only with what he wanted to hear, and without the slightest drop of enthusiasm. Jax could barely refrain from baring his teeth at them.

"Are you going to stay away from the fences from now on?"

"Yes, Uncle Jax."

"Why don't I believe you?" Jax muttered under his breath. He glanced up at Dakota, irritated to see him trying to hide a smile. "Do you find this funny? Does my beating my head against the stone walls of their skulls amuse you?"

"No, of course not. I think they get it, though, Jax. You've been lecturing them for an hour already!" Dakota said, placing a hand on Jax' shoulder. "Come on, let them go be kids."

"Fine. They can be kids all they want," Jax said, then lightly jabbed a finger into Mal and Tai's shoulders in turn, "as long as you stay away from the fences!" He added a low warning growl at the end of his statement, letting his incisors drop down for effect, and his eyes glow yellow. He wanted them to understand that he was serious. He'd be watching them.

Tai and Mal nodded, quickly slipping from the room with, Jax noticed, a scowl for him and a grateful smile for Dakota.

"You know, I'm getting really tired of playing Good Bear, Bad Wolf with those two, especially since I always have to be the heavy!" he said, scowling up at Dakota. "Why is it that I'm the one who always has to discipline them, and you're the one who always gets them off the hook?"

"Because you're the alpha of this Pack, Jax. It's what you do best." Dakota grinned at him.

"Oh, bullshit. You're my mate and every bit as much an alpha as I am. You just don't want to do the dirty work. Besides, don't they have parents? Shouldn't Oscar and Deidre be doing this instead of us?"

"They do, believe me. Oscar grounded Mal not long ago because he snuck out for a midnight run." Dakota leaned down, wrapping his arms around Jax from behind, nuzzling his neck. "You do it because you love them, Jax. They're the first children born to your Pack, you love them, and feel a profound responsibility for them. I do, too. Neither of us wants to see anything bad happen to them, but Jax... they're growing up. They're going to want to live their own lives someday. We're going to have to snip the cord sooner or later."

"Later," Jax growled. "*Much* later. For now, they're underage members of our Pack and they'll obey us or I'll chew their ears right off their heads!"

He gave in, arching his neck to give Dakota better access to the sensitive skin, but he wasn't happy about it. The bald truth was that Jax didn't want to think about the twins reaching adulthood and slipping out from under his control. He'd never forgotten the attack on the ranch by Cain and his Ultimate Predators. He knew first hand about the dangers that lurked outside the fences, and dreaded the day when the twins might have to face them all alone.

Chapter One

Present Day

Dakota sat on a rail fence, facing the sloping south pasture. Several hundred head of cattle, double-wintered and ready for market, grazed the late summer grass. The north and east pastures held more cattle; the west held the heifers and new calves. Time was swiftly approaching for a round up. They needed to ready the herd for the drive south to warmer climes for winter. The fat cattle that grazed peacefully before him wouldn't be making the same trip. They would head to slaughter, a goodly portion returning to the ranch in manageable, brown-paper wrapped pieces.

He sighed. Everyone needed to eat, including the carnivore-shifters on the ranch. Dakota's bear was an omnivore and could easily make do with vegetables and fish, but he admitted he liked a nice, thick porterhouse as well as the next man. He just didn't like seeing his food on the hoof before it landed on his plate. He grunted to himself; maybe there *was* more human in him than bear, as Jax often told him.

Jax' wolf, however, was a carnivore through and through. He couldn't survive without meat. Neither could many of their other residents. The yearly slaughter of the cattle was a necessity of survival, but it was still distasteful to Dakota. Their beef was the ranch's sole means of support, and they needed the high prices it fetched at market.

He lifted his legs over the rail and turned his back on the herd, centering his attention instead on the rambling farmhouse that stood in the clearing behind him.

The Shifting Sands Ranch had grown in both land and population over the past years. From its humble beginnings when Jax and Dakota first bought the place, at the time no more than a rundown farmhouse and ramshackle barn on several dozen acres of land, most of it forested, the ranch had grown by leaps and bounds. At first, Jax and Dakota considered themselves lucky to grow and raise enough food to keep everyone fed; slowly, as they added more breeding stock, and cleared and planted more acreage, they began to turn a small profit, investing it back into the operation.

Today, nearly two decades later, the Shifting Sands was one of the largest private ranches in the state, and its holdings spread across several square miles, most of it still uncultivated. The forests teemed with wildlife; the pastureland was blanketed with beef cattle. In the wide, sheltered valley where the original, rambling ranch house still stood, albeit renovated and equipped with modern luxuries, were a cluster of cedar log cabins, several new bunkhouses, a half dozen barns, chicken and turkey coops, hog pens, and a stable for the work horses.

Jax's Pack had grown as well, usually against his strenuous objections and supposedly better judgment. Everyone who lived and worked at the ranch was a shifter, from the cowboys who rode the herds to the men and women who grew and harvested the crops. All told, over fifty individuals now called the Shifting Sands Ranch home.

In the beginning, Jax and Dakota scouted out each new addition and brought them back to the ranch, but somehow word of the shapeshifter haven began to spread over the years by word of mouth. Shifters began to show up at their door every now and then, looking for refuge from the human world. They were welcomed and absorbed into Jax and Dakota's extended family, given a place to sleep, assigned work, and made to feel at home. As children were born to the Pack, they saw the need for home schooling and established a one-room schoolhouse on property. They had an infirmary, a game room, and a small gym. Most stayed, some didn't; the Pack's numbers swelled and ebbed like the tides. Dakota and Jax maintained that the Shifting Sands was a home, not a prison. Everyone was free to come or go as they pleased.

Predator and prey worked side-by-side, harvesting the crops, working the livestock, cooking, canning, and smoking meat. They knew from experience that the unforgiving Wyoming winters were never far away; that the late springs and short summers were only temporary reprieves from bitterly cold weather and inevitable snow that would bring the ranch to a grinding halt. The cattle would be driven south to another preserve owned by the ranch, along with dozens of hands who were, by their animal natures, intolerant of the freezing cold temperatures.

"Jolly, have you made a list of who'll be going with you this year?" Dakota asked his foreman. Jolly Grieves, a grizzled man nearing fifty, had been the Shifting Sands' foreman for six years. He was a gator-shifter, as crusty as any who swam in the swamps of Florida and Louisiana, and none-too-fond of the bitterly cold weather. He was also as misnamed an individual as Dakota had ever met -- Jolly was cantankerous, quick to temper, and swore like a sailor; he was also the most loyal and honest man Dakota and Jax knew.

"Do I look like a hatchling to you, boy?" Jolly growled, turning a yellowish eye up at Dakota. "Ain't I done this every year for the past six? Ain't fucked it up yet, have I?"

"No, sir, you haven't. So... who's going?" Dakota said, stifling a smile. In a lot of ways, Jolly reminded Dakota of Jax -- all bark and practically no bite, unless someone else bit first.

"Brett, Jake, Logan, Davis, the entire Falls family, and the rest of the crew who went last year want to make the trip, plus a few of the new ones, Jeffries, and Mason. Oh, and..." Jolly ducked his head, his words lost to the wind.

Dakota cocked his head. Jolly's voice had dropped off, and he hadn't caught the last name on the man's list. "Say again?"

Jolly, still looking in the opposite direction, said something under his breath that Dakota couldn't make out. "Jolly, I can't hear you. Speak up, for God's sake."

Jolly harrumphed and rolled his eyes before looking directly at Dakota with an unwavering stare. Dakota saw Jolly's pupils elongate as his gator flashed within them. "I said 'Mal.' He said he wants to go this year."

"*Mal?* Are you crazy? He can't go! He's just a kid!" Dakota hissed. "If Jax hears about this, he'll flip, Jolly. You know how he is with the twins!"

"The boy's eighteen years old, Dakota. Old enough to leave the nest, if'n he wants to, I reckon," Jolly countered. "I gotta tell you, he seems set on going, and I sure as Hell ain't gonna be the one to tell him he can't."

"Oh, Lord. What's gotten into that boy? He knows his Uncle Jax will sink his teeth into whatever part of Mal he can catch when he finds out Mal wants to leave!" Dakota swore, his eyes darting toward the ranch house again. "I'd better talk to him. Do me a favor, Jolly. When you give Jax the list, leave Mal's name off it for now."

"Will do, just so long as you take the fall for it when Jax finds out," Jolly said. He tipped his battered, leather cowboy hat at Dakota and walked off in the direction of the main barn.

Dakota swiped a hand over his face. This was the last thing he needed. It was more than hard enough trying to take care of all the last minute details of getting the ranch prepped and battened down for the coming winter. He didn't need the added stress of Mal suddenly wanting to exert his independence.

Mal, and his twin sister Tai, were the first members born to Jax' pack, back during the winter they'd founded the ranch, eighteen years ago. Jax and Dakota loved them as much as if the twins were their own children, although Jax, in his need to keep them safe from all harm, both real and imagined, was slightly overprotective.

Okay, Dakota thought, sighing, maybe a little more than slightly. Maybe more like neurotically overprotective, smothering, and clutching. He means well, but he keeps those two on too tight a leash.

Dakota knew Jax was still worried about the Ultimate Predators, even though their leader, Cain had been killed in a fight at the Shifting Sands the year of the twins' birth. Even after all the years that had passed, Dakota shuddered thinking about the terrifying Tyrannosaur-shifter.

For eighteen years, Jax kept a vigilant watch over the twins, interrogating all new arrivals, patrolling the fences at regular intervals, doing everything in his power to keep them and his Pack safe from another attack.

Hearing that Mal wanted to leave his protective embrace was going to set the alpha wolf inside Jax to bristling, and Dakota knew the result wouldn't be pretty. Jax could be formidable when his wolf-self was aroused.

Then again, so could Mal. He and his sister had powers that no one could explain. They were telekinetic, and had other abilities that completely mystified everyone. Even though neither had ever lifted a finger against anyone at the ranch, if it came down to a pissing match between Jax and Mal, Dakota wasn't sure at all that Jax would come out on top.

Dakota sighed again and jumped down from the fence, hitching up his pants. When it came to Jax, there was only one way Dakota knew of that always worked to soften the blow of bad news -- a tried and true method Dakota had employed for the last eighteen years, one that hadn't failed him yet.

Sex.

A slow smile creased his cheeks as he trotted in the direction of the farmhouse, suddenly eager to get Jax alone and prepare him for the news that Mal wanted to leave the safety of Jax's Pack.

Dakota opened the door to the house, his nose twitching as the smell of something good baking hit it. *Deidre must be in the kitchen again*, he thought. She had a real flair for baking, even though her panther was a carnivore. Her mate, Oscar, was a rhino-shifter vegetarian with a sweet tooth, and she happily indulged him at every opportunity.

He stared at the door that led to his and Jax's office where he knew Jax was working on the ranch's books, then at the door that led to the kitchen, his prick and his stomach arguing about which direction his feet should take.

His stomach won.

The kitchen was warm, and thick with the smells of cinnamon and baking bread. Five loaves of freshly baked raisin bread lay on cooling racks near the window; Deidre was just pulling three more steaming loaves from the hot oven.

"Smells good, Deidre," Dakota said, removing his hat and sliding into a chair at the kitchen table.

She turned and smiled at him, and gave him a wink. "I don't suppose I could interest you in a slice, with some of that fresh butter?" As if there was any chance he'd decline. He was practically salivating.

"Yes ma'am. That'd be great," Dakota said, watching as she sliced a thick wedge off one of the first loaves and slathered it with creamy pale butter, putting it on a plate and sliding it across the table to him. He took a bite, and rolled his eyes in near ecstasy. "Lord! For a carnivore, you sure have a way with sweets, Deidre."

She laughed, slid three more raw loaves into the oven and set the timer, before taking a seat opposite Dakota. He noticed her smile slip as she glanced toward the door, as if to make sure they were alone. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Have you heard...?"

"About Mal? Yeah, Jolly told me. What is he thinking, Deidre? You're his mother; haven't you tried to talk him out of this foolishness?"

Deidre nodded, looking down at her lap as her fingers twisted knots into her apron. "Of course I have. I've talked myself blue in the face, but he insists that he wants to go south with the herd." Her eyes lifted to meet Dakota's. "I'm afraid for him, Dakota. He doesn't know himself yet. Doesn't know what he can do. What if something happens to him? What if he... loses control?"

"What about Oscar? He's Mal's father, after all. What does he say about this?"

She made a decidedly unladylike noise. "He doesn't want Mal to go, either, but he says it's Mal's decision. Oscar says Mal needs to find himself, and that's not likely to happen here, living with his parents and his uncles, particularly, his Uncle Jax." She sighed, swiping a flour-coated hand over her face. "Dakota, I remember what it was like to be on my own. Oscar does, too. He roamed the desert for a long time as his rhino, while I prowled the cornfields, catching rats and snakes, avoiding the humans' guns and traps. It wasn't easy. The world is a dangerous place out there for people like us."

Dakota nodded thoughtfully. "I know. We've all lived out on our own, except for the twins and the other children born here. For all our lectures, I don't think they really understand what it's like. Still, he wouldn't *really* be on his own -- he'd be with Jolly and the others. I'll talk to Mal, Deidre, and try to get him to change his mind, although I don't know what good it will do."

"What about Jax?"

Dakota smiled, winking at her. "Let me worry about Jax. First, I'm going to talk to Mal, and see if I can get him to come around to our way of thinking. No sense in raising Jax's hackles over nothing. If Mal decides to stay, there's no problem." He popped the last of his slice of raisin bread into his mouth, patted his stomach, and went in search of his nephew.

Chapter Two

Mal sat on the edge of the bed, staring out of the window. There was a whole big world out there, past the perimeter fence of the ranch. He'd never experienced any of it, aside from a few short trips a year into town. Until very recently, the fact that he'd lived his entire life on the Shifting Sands ranch hadn't bothered him. He had his twin sister, Tai, his parents, uncles, and extended family. It had always been enough for him.

Not any more.

Lately, he suffered from an itch under his skin that had nothing to do with shifting. He was restless, found himself waking at odd hours of the night feeling as if the walls were closing in on him. Worst of all, he lived with a constant hard-on. Not since he'd first entered puberty and shifted for the first time had the relentlessness of his dick tortured him as it did now. The fact that there was no one on the ranch he could hook-up with didn't help matters. Everyone was either too put-off by his powers, or too intimidated by his uncles to take the chance of slipping between the sheets with him.

Honestly, if he masturbated any more frequently than he already did, he was going to rub his cock down into a nub.

It was a secret he kept from everyone, including his twin sister, Tai. Mal could only imagine the ribbing he'd get if he tried to talk with her about his perpetually horny state. He knew she could smell it on him, but she never mentioned it, which was fine by him. He'd already had to suffer through a "sex talk" with his father -- he didn't need to repeat the experience with Tai.

"Mal?" Tai's soft voice called to him, breaking through the silence he tended to wrap around himself lately. "What's wrong? Come on, we've never had any secrets between us. I always know when something's bothering you, and you haven't been yourself for months now! You're driving me crazy."

Mal shrugged, refusing to look at her. He hadn't told her about his decision to leave, either. He couldn't find the right words or time. Leaving had nothing to do with Tai -- he loved his sister -- but he needed more. He needed adventure, something different, a change of scenery.

If he were brutally honest, he realized that what he really needed was to get laid, and he wasn't going to find a willing partner here at the ranch. He'd grown up with the few kids living there who were his age -- it would be like trying to seduce Tai, for God's sake. The thought alone was enough to make him want seriously to blow chunks.

The fact that he was finding himself attracted to other guys didn't help. He hadn't told anyone about that, either. Even though several couples at the ranch, including their uncles, were gay, Mal wasn't sure Tai or his parents would understand. The last thing he needed was to alienate the people he was closest to.

The southern grazing pastures were less than two hundred miles from Las Vegas. Amid the crowds and gaming of Glitter Gulch, he'd have anonymity, gay bars, and a much better chance at hooking up without his secret being blasted from one end of the ranch to the other.

His parents were being pains in the butt about his decision. Mom was dead set against him leaving. His father understood, but still wasn't thrilled with the prospect. Forget Uncle Dakota or Uncle Jax -- he didn't plan on telling *them* at all. If he did, he had no doubt that they'd find a way to keep him at home. *I'll leave them a note when I go, explaining everything, saying I'm sorry.* He tried not to think about how cowardly his plan sounded.

"Maybe you just need to run," Tai continued. He heard the tentative hope in her voice, and refused to hurt her by telling her that he did want to run -- away, from everything and everyone. "Come on. We'll shift and take a good, long run across the west pasture. We can go to the waterfalls, like we used to do when we were kids."

Mal smiled in spite of himself. The small waterfalls hidden in the forest that edged the western boundaries of the ranch was a secret place for Tai and him. They'd discovered it when they were twelve, shortly after they learned to shift shapes.

Cascading down a sheer cliff from the river that threaded along at the top, it misted the vegetation that surrounded it and emptied into a small pool carved into the forest floor. The pool fed a meandering stream that eventually wound through the ranch's pastureland, providing water for the ranch. The waterfall was a place of beauty and mystery to Tai and him, and they'd claimed it, as well as the tiny cave behind it, as their own. The area was outside of the electrified perimeter fence, bumping up against the ranch's property line. The fence was no obstacle for Tai or Mal -- they'd found early on that they could use their powers to temporarily negate the current and slip past it. They'd never told anyone about the waterfalls and cave, or that they continued to go there.

"Nah. I'm just not in the mood, Tai."

"You're never in the mood anymore, Mal. You need to tell me what's wrong," Tai insisted. He could see by the set of her jaw that she wasn't going anywhere without him, and nearly made up his mind to do as she suggested. Maybe he could break the news to her at the waterfalls, where they'd be surrounded by pleasant memories.

A knock at the door startled them both. Mal rolled his eyes dramatically at Tai and they both laughed. It was as if they were still twelve and worried about being caught planning to do something wrong. "Come in!" Tai sang, playfully smacking Mal on the shoulder.

Uncle Dakota stuck his head in the room. "Hey, kids. Um, I need to talk to Mal for a minute."

Damn it Jolly! Mal thought, frowning. *I'm going to turn that old coot into a pair of boots for this!* He knew immediately what Dakota wanted from the look on his uncle's face. Jolly must have spilled Mal's plans.

"What's wrong, Uncle Dakota?" Tai asked, sliding closer to Mal. He nudged her with his elbow.

"Go on, Tai. I'll meet you later. *At the waterfall*, he added, using the unique language the two of them had developed as toddlers and perfected as they'd grown up. They continued to use it whenever they wanted to keep a secret from everyone else. It was a system of gibberish and meaningless gestures to the world at large, and yet he and Tai understood each other perfectly.

"No, I think I'll stay. *There's something going on, and I want to know what it is.*"

"Tai, you don't have to be here," Mal said through gritted teeth. *"This is between me and Dakota."*

"Forget it. I'm not going anywhere. I don't mind waiting for you. Uncle Dakota won't care if I stay," Tai said stubbornly.

"Do you two mind speaking English, and not that chirping-clacking racket you call a language?" Dakota said, chuckling as he stepped into the room and closed the door. "I'm sure Tai already knows about you wanting to leave, Mal. I'm here to try to talk some sense into your thick head."

Tai gasped, turning on Mal. He felt his cheeks burn, and couldn't bring himself to meet her eyes. "Leave? You're leaving the ranch? Leaving me? When did you plan on telling me, Mal? How could you keep this from me?" Anguish warred with anger, her emotions flashing across her face.

"Aw, crap. Sorry, Mal...I thought for sure you'd already told her. I thought you two told each other everything," Dakota said, biting his lip and rubbing the back of his neck. He had the decency to look sheepish.

"Evidently not everything," Tai hissed. She punched Mal squarely on the shoulder, and didn't pull back. He rubbed the spot, knowing it was going to leave a bruise.

"I was going to tell you, Tai. I just didn't know how," Mal said honestly. "I'm riding south with the herd. It's only for the winter. I'll be back in the spring."

"Why?"

"That was my question, too," Dakota put in. He leaned back against the door, folding his arms across his chest, tucking his chin down. His dark eyes bore into Mal's face, demanding an answer. "You know what this is going to do to your Uncle Jax."

Mal sprung to his feet as all the pent up frustration he'd been sitting on for months boiled over. "I'm tired of living my life according to Uncle Jax's rules! I'm eighteen, Uncle Dakota. I'm a grown man, capable of making my own decisions!"

"Oh, yeah," Dakota said sarcastically. "It shows in the way you were trying to sneak off with the herd, and not tell us you planned on going."

"I told Mom and Dad. I only didn't tell you because Uncle Jax is not rational when it comes to me and Tai!" Mal shouted.

"And what about me?" Tai put in. The hurt in her voice made Mal squirm with guilt. "When were you going to tell me? Or were you going to wait until I woke up one morning and you were gone?"

"I was going to tell you today, Tai. Honest," Mal said weakly. "I thought you, at least, would understand. Uncle Jax is another story. I figured he'd chain me to my bed. You know he's psycho when it comes to us."

Dakota growled, a deep rumbling that reverberated in the room, and Mal realized he'd stepped over the line. "I'll remind you to keep a civil tongue in your head when you talk about my mate, Mal. Jax loves you. He always has, since the day you were born. You're part of his Pack, and he only wants to keep you safe. We all do."

Guilt weighed even heavier on his shoulders, but Mal still couldn't keep the anger from his voice or gestures as he spread his arms wide. "Safe from *what*? From life? I deserve to have one, you know. Believe me; I know all about the Ultimate Predators, about how they tried to kill everybody here the year we were born. You and Uncle Jax preached to us about them from the time we were old enough to understand. Tai and I used to have nightmares about them! It's over though -- you killed Cain, right? We haven't heard a word from them in eighteen *years*, Uncle Dakota! They're history. Gone! There's nothing for Jax and you to protect us from anymore!"

"There are other dangers out there, Mal. Humans, other shifters..."

"There's a *world* out there, Uncle Dakota. I want to see it. I want to experience things for myself instead of just reading about them or watching them on television! I'm tired of being a prisoner here!" Mal yelled. He felt his skin flush and his cheeks burn, righteous anger roiling through his gut. His horse-self screamed in defiance, the sound eerie coming from his human mouth. He heard Tai gasp, but ignored her.

"*Prisoner*? Is that what you think you are?" Dakota asked softly. "Lord, son, we never meant for you to feel that way. I know Jax is overprotective, but he's had good reason. You and your sister, you're different, even from the rest of us. If anybody -- God forbid, the government -- ever found out what you two can do, they'd raid the ranch and take you away, and there wouldn't be a damn thing we could do to stop them, although we'd die

trying. They'd lock you up in a cage, probably, and try to figure out how to use you to their advantage. If they couldn't control you, they'd... trust me when I tell you we were only trying to protect you, not imprison you."

Mal took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to calm himself down. "I know, I know, but Uncle Dakota, don't you see? You're doing the same thing you were trying to protect us from, except your cage is a few square miles of ranch land in the mountains of Wyoming," he said quietly. "I love you all, but I have to leave, at least for a while."

Tai remained silent, staring down at her hands, while Dakota finally sighed and nodded. "Alright, Mal," he said. "I'll break the news to Jax. Be warned -- you might not want to cross paths with him for the next few days."

"Thanks, Uncle Dakota."

Dakota nodded again and slipped out of the bedroom, leaving Mal and Tai alone. Mal sat down next to Tai, and put an arm around her shoulders, which she immediately shrugged off. "Tai, come on. I'm only going to the south pastures with the herd, not to the other side of the universe. I'll be back soon."

"You don't get it, do you?" Tai cried, turning her face up toward his. Tears glistened in their brilliant green depths. "We've never been separated before, Mal. What would I do if something happened to you? I'd die, that's what."

"Tai..."

"Don't *Tai* me. I'm not spending the entire winter worrying about you, and you're not leaving me here all alone to have to deal with Mom and Dad, and Uncle Dakota and Jax! They're going to be every bit as miserable and as worried as I am. They'll drive me nuts! If you leave, then so do I. We'll *both* go south with the herd."

"What? Oh, *Hell* no! No way, Tai. You're not going anywhere. It's too dangerous--"

"Oh, you are *not* pulling that male chauvinistic crap with me, Mal! I'm just as capable of defending myself as you are," Tai said, her chin lifting with a stubborn tilt. Her eyes flashed with the heat of anger, drying her tears and daring him to push the limits of her patience.

Of course, he did just that.

"It's different with me, Tai! You're a girl. You're not riding south with a bunch of wild roughnecks."

"*Wild roughnecks*? Please," she said, laughing disdainfully. "Who should I be afraid of on the drive? Brett? Jake? They're both old enough to be my father. Heck, Jolly's old enough

to be my *grandfather*! None of them would ever try to hurt me, and you know it. If you go, I go."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Uncle Jax will never let you go."

"Uncle Jax couldn't stop me any more than he could stop you. And before you get any ideas, neither can you, brother dear, so don't even try." Tai stood up, flipping her long, blond hair out of her eyes. "I'm going for a run. When I get back, you can tell me what you've decided to do." She slammed out of the room without another look back, leaving Mal sitting on the edge of the bed, simmering in his own juices and wondering how in the hell his simple plan of riding south had blown up in his face.

All he'd wanted to do was get laid, for God's sake! Was that too much to ask?

He heard Tai stomp down the stairs, and watched out of the window until she appeared in the yard. She was already stripping out of her clothes as she ran. He watched her duck behind the bushes that grew near the fence, looking to the right and left to make sure no one was watching before shedding her bra and shimmying out of her jeans. Tall and athletically built, Tai's body was strong and lean. He only saw it for an instant before she shifted.

The magnificent, pure white mare standing in Tai's place reared on her powerful hind legs, screaming a ringing challenge that he heard clearly through the glass. She raced along the fence, jumping it at the far end, and then took off at a full gallop across the pasture. He watched until she was out of sight.

He'd never seen her so angry. *She's got a right to be*, his conscience scolded him. *How would you feel if she tried to sneak away without telling you? You'd never let her go alone either, and you know it. Even if Jax manages to keep her here when you leave, she'll find a way to follow you.*

Damn it! He couldn't chance it. He was perfectly willing to accept the risks, but he'd never be able to live with himself if something happened to Tai. He'd just have to put up with the itch to wander and suffer his aching dick for a while longer, until he could convince her that he needed to do this alone. He could catch up to the herd later. After all, he'd waited this long to ease the ache in his groin -- another week or so wouldn't matter.

His conscience clear but his heart heavy, he left his bedroom and headed downstairs and outside. Reaching the paddock, he jumped the fence, quickly stripped out of his clothing, and shifted.

Hard hooves struck the ground as he took off running in the direction Tai had taken, his sleek black stallion painting an inky streak across the pasture.

Chapter Three

Dakota found Jax hunched over the computer in the office, just where he'd knew Jax would be, two fingers jabbing at the keyboard. His salt-and-pepper hair hung in his eyes and he looked jittery. An empty cup of coffee -- probably his fourth or fifth that day -- told Dakota why.

"Jax, haven't I asked you to lay off the caffeine? You know what it does to you," Dakota chided, lifting the empty cup and sniffing at it. "French roast? Are you crazy? Are you looking to give yourself a heart attack?"

Jax growled and snatched the cup out of Dakota's hands without looking up from the screen. "I'm a big boy. I can have a cup of coffee if I want one."

"A cup, sure. A *pot* is another story."

"Stop mothering me," Jax snapped.

"Stop behaving like a child and I will," Dakota said, completely nonplussed, leaning over Jax's shoulder to see the computer screen. An Excel spreadsheet dotted with numbers looked back at him. "How long have you been squinting at these figures? Where are your reading glasses?"

"Not long enough, and I don't need glasses. My eyes are just as sharp as they were twenty years ago."

"Yeah, remember to tell me that later, when you get another headache because you've been straining your eyes. We're not getting any younger, Jax. We all need to make a few concessions to age, and reading glasses are yours."

"Did you come in here just to nag at me, or was there something you actually needed to talk to me about?" Jax snipped, sitting back and looking up at Dakota in a huff.

Damn, but even after eighteen years, Jax is still adorable when he glowers like that, Dakota thought, suppressing a grin. *Adorable and hot enough to smelt iron... in particular the iron inside my pants.* The grin slipped past his control, spreading across his face. "Actually, I was hoping I could convince you to take a break."

"Why? I'm not done, and it's not time to eat yet."

"I meant take a break upstairs with me. Alone. In the bedroom," Dakota grinned mischievously, wagging his eyebrows.

Jax licked his lips hungrily, but then narrowed his eyes. "What do you want, Dakota?"

"I just told you. Do I need to draw you a schematic?"

"I mean, what do you *really* want, Dakota? The only times you jump my bones in the middle of the day while there's still work to be done, is when you want something. Usually something I *don't* want." He suddenly looked aghast. "Please tell me you haven't found more shifters! What are they this time? Cockroaches? Skunks?"

Dakota affected a pained look, placing his hand over his heart. "Why, I'm wounded, Jax. Would I do that to you?"

Jax made a rude noise. "You do it to me all the time. Its how you get me to do everything I don't want to do, and you know it!"

"Can't it just be that I'm warm for your form?"

"*Warm for your form?*" Dakota watched Jax fight the laugh, but the laugh won easily. His lips tilted, and his green eyes sparkled, crinkling at the corners. "I can't believe you actually said that. You've been watching too many reruns of fifties sitcoms."

Dakota smirked, reaching for Jax's hand. He planted it squarely against his crotch and held it there. "Does this feel like something from a sitcom?"

Jax grinned up at him. "No, it feels like something from National Geographic. *Bears Gone Wild*."

"I'll show you just how wild I can be as soon as you get that pretty ass of yours out of that chair and upstairs." Dakota ground his hips against Jax's hand. He hissed through his teeth as his cock hardened further, pressing outward against Jax's palm. "Unless you'd rather me sweep the desk clear and have you right here."

"Oh, no! It took me weeks to get everything back in order the last time you did that, and I don't want to have to replace another computer. They're freaking expensive, Dakota."

"Then move it, lover."

"You're a pushy bastard, you know that?"

"Stop being an alpha for a minute and get moving!"

Jax huffed and puffed, but he was still grinning as he hit the "save" button, and stood up. He slipped a hand behind Dakota's head, pulling him down for a hot, wet kiss. "It's a good thing I love you, or I'd have to take a bite out of your hairy ass just to assert my authority," he said, laughing. He scooted out of Dakota's arms, and opened the office door, heading for the stairs.

As Dakota followed Jax up the staircase to the second floor bedrooms, he noticed Deidre standing in the doorway to the kitchen, wringing a dishtowel in her hands. Suddenly,

chasing Jax upstairs to the bedroom didn't seem like as much fun as it had a second ago as he remembered why he'd sought Jax out and what he had to tell him. Dakota's step grew heavier, and he paused outside the doorway to their room, pondering whether he should tell Jax before, or relax him a little first, and tell him later.

He had the distinct feeling that the news of Mal's impending departure was going to put a serious crimp into their lovemaking.

Still, this wasn't like the other times. Dakota was never above using sex to get Jax to change his mind about something -- usually about taking a trip to find a shifter to bring back to the ranch with them. This was different. This was about the twins, and that made it important.

He couldn't do it. Couldn't bring himself to try to coerce Jax by sexing him up, not this time. When Dakota finally entered the bedroom, he found Jax naked and lying spread-eagled across their large featherbed. He hung his head, eyes looking everywhere but at Jax and the body Dakota loved so much.

"What's the matter? I'm here, and the last time I checked, I was naked," Jax said, patting the edge of the mattress. "Come on, Dakota. I'm waiting!"

"We have to talk first, Jax."

"Talk? Is that some new kind of foreplay?" Jax said, laughing. "Okay. Talk dirty to me, baby."

"I'm serious, Jax. We have a problem."

"What problem? We didn't have a problem five minutes ago when you threatened to fuck me sideways 'til Sunday across the desk downstairs."

"Yeah, we did, but I thought... well, never mind what I thought. The fact is that we have a big problem, one that you're not going to like at all," Dakota said. He sat down on a chair near the windows, knowing that if he sat on the bed, Jax would touch him, and he didn't want to be distracted at the moment. He wanted to get it over with, let Jax chase his tail for a while, howling and snapping as Dakota knew he would, and then get on with the business of comfort sex.

Jax sat up, leaning his back against the headboard. He crossed his arms over his chest, arching an eyebrow at Dakota. "Okay. Spill it. What's wrong? I know it can't be an emergency, because you'd never be sitting there so calmly. What is it, Dakota?"

"It's about Mal, Jax. He's... feeling a little boxed in, lately."

Jax snorted, rolling his eyes. "Is that all? What's he want? A new ATV?"

Dakota shook his head. "A new toy isn't going to solve this problem, hon. Mal's growing up. He's eighteen. When you and I were eighteen, we were out on our own."

Jax scowled. "When you and I were eighteen, our parents had tried to kill us, we didn't know there were any other shifters in the world, and we were each all alone and trying to survive. Mal is different, special, and so is Tai. We worked hard to make this a safe place for them. This is where they belong, where we can keep them safe."

"I know it. He seems to think differently."

"What are you trying to tell me, Dakota? Just say it, and stop beating around the bush."

Dakota took a deep breath. "Mal wants to go south with the herd. Just for the winter--"

"No! Absolutely not! Is he out of his fucking mind? Does he have any idea of the dangers that are out there? Hasn't anything we've told him sunk into that pea brain of his?" Jax's face turned red, slowly deepening into purple. The vein in his forehead throbbed visibly, his lip curling to show lengthening incisors, as his wolf snarled to life. "We may have killed Cain, but the Predators are still out there somewhere! I know they are, Dakota! I can feel it! No! He's not going anywhere, and that's final!"

"Jax--"

"Don't even say it, Dakota! I'm the alpha here, and I say that there's no way he's stepping one foot off this property!"

"Jax, listen to me!" Dakota roared, the volume of his voice stunning Jax into silence. He rarely raised his voice -- he'd never really had to, but on the rare occasions he did, it was commanding and deep. It crashed like thunder in the room. "He's eighteen. He's an adult, not a little boy anymore. We can't force him to stay."

"The hell we can't!"

"We can't, and you know it. Isn't it better that he go south with the herd, where Jolly and the rest can keep an eye on him, than out on his own? He *will* go, Jax. One way or another, he'll leave."

Jax stared hard at Dakota, obviously trying to find an argument to refute his logic, and failing. When he spoke again, his fear for Mal shone in his eyes. "Why, Dakota? What's he looking for out there that he can't find here?" Jax finally asked.

Dakota smirked, a soft half-grin. "What do you think, Jax? Have you ever seen him with any girl but Tai? I know the Falls family is going south, and their daughter, Emily, is going with them. She's about the twins' age, isn't she? Maybe he has his eye on her."

"So? He can't wait until spring when she comes back?"

"If you wanted to mate, could *you* wait until spring?"

"That's different!"

"The only difference is that he's eighteen, and you're forty-five. Come on, don't you remember what it was like to be young? When you couldn't keep your pecker in your pants without putting a padlock on your zipper?"

"I'm still young."

"Not *that* young."

Jax frowned again. "You're not helping your case, here, Dakota. Besides, he's too young to mate. He's just a kid!"

Dakota laughed, giving in and moving to sit on the mattress next to Jax. "He's not a kid anymore, Jax. I think Mal is feeling the urge to mate. That's all. Maybe it'll be the Falls girl. Maybe he's got his cap set for someone else who's going south. Maybe there isn't anyone in particular, and he just wants to get laid. All I know is that if we force him to stay, he'll hate us for it."

"What about Tai? She's the same age, but you don't see her letting her hormones run her life."

"Tai was seeing the Wilson boy. You know him -- the tall skinny guy with the tattoos on his arms. They have a lot in common -- he's a horse-shifter, too. I haven't seen them together lately, but--"

Jax suddenly straightened up, and the vein in his forehead started throbbing again visibly. "What? Since when is she seeing that skinny rat-faced, swaybacked, glue factory reject? Why wasn't I told about this? If he's touched a hair on her head I'll--"

"Yeah, and this is *exactly* why you weren't told," Dakota said, laughing. "The Wilsons aren't eager for you to geld their son."

Jax huffed, blowing a strand of hair out of his eyes. He folded his arms across his chest again, eyeing Dakota suspiciously. "What *else* haven't you told me, Dakota? Come on, you might as well let me have it both barrels right now."

"There's nothing else. I swear. That's it, other than the fact that I love you. I don't think I've told you in a while." Dakota smiled warmly, knowing in that moment that everything would be all right. .

Jax snorted, rolling his eyes. "I suppose you think that makes everything okay, huh? Are you going to strip naked now, and let me have my wicked way with you? Make me forget all about this? Get me to agree with you, just like I always end up doing?"

"Well," Dakota said, pretending to mull it over, "We could skip the first part. I wouldn't advise it, though. Having sex while I'm still dressed could prove difficult."

Jax sputtered indignantly, and tried to push his way off the bed past Dakota, but Dakota refused to let him. Oh, they'd had their fair share of arguments over the years, but not once in all that time had Dakota let Jax leave their bedroom while still pissed off at him. He launched himself forward, using his larger size to tackle Jax flat on his back on the mattress, straddling Jax's thighs.

Dakota was already hard for Jax, and he used it to his full advantage, rubbing himself over Jax, feeling Jax's cock respond, hardening underneath his unforgiving denim. Jax moaned softly, reaching for Dakota's lips.

"Someday, I'm not going to let you buy me off with sex," Jax whispered hoarsely, his breath warm and sweet.

"Yeah, but today's not that day, is it?"

"Fuck no," Jax growled, flipping them over. He looked down at Dakota with fire flashing in his green eyes. He leaned down and crushed his mouth against Dakota's in a kiss that scorched Dakota to his toes, and forged every inch of him between his lips and his feet into steel. "Today, you pay."

Chapter Four

There'd been more than one occasion over the years when Jax wondered why he allowed Dakota to win him over with sex. After all, it wasn't fitting that an alpha would capitulate so easily just because his mate was naked and riding him like a cowboy gone feral.

When Dakota got naked, standing at the foot of the bed looking at Jax with lust smoldering in his brown eyes, though, Jax couldn't resist. Never had been able to, not once in all the time they'd been together. At least this time Dakota had told him what the problem was first. Usually, he waited until Jax's head was buzzing with the remnants of a nuclear orgasm before he spilled his guts.

Dakota smiled at him, a sexy, half-hitched grin. Jax could feel Dakota's gaze skimming over him like ghostly fingers, and his body reacted just as strongly as if Dakota had actually touched him. His nipples grew diamond-hard, his belly warming as his balls swelled, and his cock thickened. He shifted his weight, ass rubbing over the soft comforter, spreading his legs a little to give Dakota a better view.

The mattress dipped as Dakota crawled up onto it, his large body slowly casting Jax into shadow. The years had been kind to Dakota. He was still every bit as big, beefy, and hard-bodied as he'd been when they'd first met – at least to Jax's eyes. Jax never saw the strands of silver in Dakota's hair, or the minute wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and around his mouth, or the slight sag along his jaw line. To him, Dakota was still the hottest man ever born.

"Tell me what you want," Dakota whispered as he leaned down over Jax. His eyes were hungry; the raw need in them matching the burning ache Jax felt in his veins.

"Want your mouth," Jax groaned, reaching up to pull Dakota down. Dakota's lips were soft and warm, parting for Jax's tongue. His hips dipped, rubbing their burgeoning erections together, ratcheting Jax's need exponentially. "All over me," he quickly amended.

Dakota seemed very happy to comply with Jax's request, as always. His lips left Jax's, traveling south to greener pastures, taking time to sample every inch between Jax's mouth and his groin along the way.

Jax squirmed as Dakota's lips and teeth worried his nipples, moving from one to the other repeatedly. He thrust his hands into Dakota's shaggy hair, fingers curling tight in the smooth strands. "Good goddamn, Dakota," he breathed, tilting his hips to feel Dakota's erection brush against his own. "More, I want more."

"Mmm."

Jax didn't know if Dakota was answering him or commenting on his taste. Dimly, he realized it didn't matter, not in the slightest. What did was Dakota's hot mouth inching inexorably toward the part of Jax aching for attention.

Dakota's tongue licked a wet path over Jax's ribs, his teeth and lips teasing relentlessly at Jax's skin, speckling it with love bites. After what seemed an eternity to Jax, Dakota's warm breath finally blew across the tortured flesh of his erection, making him moan in both ecstasy and relief.

Brown eyes flicked up toward him, mischief twinkling in their depths. "This is what you've been waiting for, huh?"

"Less talk. More suck."

"Bossy bastard," Dakota said, chuckling. His laughter blew soft gusts of air over Jax's dick, making it bob, and the rest of Jax to writhe.

The sarcastic retort forming on Jax's tongue was cut short as Dakota took him into the hot mouth, working him with lots of tongue. Feather light flicks under the ridge, and smooth swirls over the head drove Jax to the brink. "Stop teasing!" he hissed through gritted teeth, picking his head up and shooting a glare at Dakota.

Dakota's answering rumble of amusement sent a shockwave rolling through Jax's balls, putting an end to Jax's patience. He refused to allow Dakota to torture him any further. He needed, *now*. He smirked as his fingers tightened in Dakota's hair until a wince skewed those laughing brown eyes. Jax pumped his hips upward, feeding his cock into Dakota's warm, welcoming mouth.

"Oh, fuck yeah!" Jax murmured under his breath as Dakota took him all the way in, sucking so hard Dakota's cheeks hollowed from the effort. Dakota's lips dragged along Jax's sensitive skin, and he used his teeth to graze the surface.

Suddenly, Dakota growled low in his chest and spat Jax out. He sat back on his haunches, his large hands sliding under Jax's ass, lifting him up off the mattress. Without warning, Dakota's mouth attacked Jax's balls and asshole in a fury, sucking and tonguing him with raw abandon. Jax's hands fisted into the comforter, eyes screwing shut against the repeated waves of pleasure wracking him.

Just as abruptly, Dakota dropped him back to the mattress. Jax was breathing hard, his release hovering just out of reach; he felt frustratingly stymied. He bared his teeth in impatience as Dakota darted to the nightstand and returned with a tube of slick.

It would be worth the interruption, Jax knew, but... *damn*. His entire body tensed to the point of pain, every one of his nerves screaming for Dakota to finish what he'd started.

He didn't have long to wait. Dakota's eyes were hooded, his tongue sweeping his lower lip as he prepared himself and Jax. Viscous slick momentarily cooled the skin of Jax's cock, as Dakota squatted over him.

Jax was certain Dakota was trying to kill him. It was the only reason he could think of -- given his mind was temporarily out of commission as all of his blood diverted to his groin -- why Dakota was taking fucking *forever* to mount him.

Then that, as well as a dozen other half-formed thoughts, was gone as Dakota lowered himself onto Jax's cock. Dakota's body accepted him easily, a warm glove of living silk wrapping around his dick, and Jax's arousal swiftly returned to its former, fevered pitch.

"Don't just fucking *sit* there -- ride me," Jax hissed, grabbing Dakota's hips. His fingers dug into firm flesh, hips thrusting, urging Dakota to do as he'd ordered -- or begged for, depending on one's point of view. Again, Jax realized the interpretation didn't matter -- only the result did.

Dakota began to move, raising and lowering his body over Jax's erection, grunting softly. Dakota set the pace, just fast enough to keep Jax's arousal from soaring past the point of no return. It was torture at its sweetest, but Jax soon ran out of patience and took matters into his own hands.

He tightened his grip on Dakota's hips, stilling him, and bent his knees, planting his feet. His hips began to pump faster, then faster yet, his cock pounding into Dakota's body. Dakota soft cries sounded like erotic music to Jax's ears, adding to his pleasure. Through half-closed eyes, he watched Dakota fist himself and just before Jax's climax began to spiral out of control, he felt Dakota's come splash on his belly.

Jax's orgasm was so sharp, so intense, that he cried out in a strangled voice, every muscle in his body tightening against the pleasure. Time slowed; he felt Dakota's body contract around him, felt his own juices lubricating Dakota's hole, dripping onto his balls, heard his own voice dimly, as if from a great distance as he rode his climax to its highest point, and slowly drifted down. His mind was fuzzy, not capable of thinking, only feeling all of the incredible sensations running through him.

Dakota's soft mouth on his finally brought him around again. "Love you," he whispered, breathlessly.

"You, too. Shit, you fucking drained me," Jax whimpered happily.

"Complaining?"

"Did that sound like a complaint? I was shooting for a compliment."

"You shot, all right. I'm going to be walking like a kid with a full diaper for a week," Dakota said. He laughed, burying his face in Jax's neck.

"Damn straight. Feel free to tell everyone who sees you that I'm the one responsible. Still got it, even at forty-five."

Dakota pulled back, his fingers cupping Jax's jaw. "As far as you and I go, age doesn't matter, Jax. Don't you know that I get just as hot and bothered now when you look at me as I did twenty years ago? You and me -- we're still going to be messing the sheets when we're ninety."

"Ooh, I don't know. Wouldn't want you to break a hip," Jax quipped, although his insides melted at the tenderness in Dakota's voice.

"The day I can't fuck you into the mattress is the day they can bury my hairy ass."

Jax cackled, pulling Dakota into a bone-crunching hug. "I love you. Now, tomorrow, and for the rest of our lives," he said, meaning every word. "Now get off me and let's go find Mal. He's in line for an ass-chewing that he's not likely to forget."

"Jax..."

"Oh, don't *Jax* me. I'm not going to try to stop him, but you can't expect me to let him run off without getting an ear-blistering lecture! I need to have *some* fun, Dakota."

He tried to maintain a straight face, but couldn't, and laughed. He still didn't like the idea of Mal leaving -- in fact, it scared him shitless -- but he also recognized the wisdom in Dakota's argument. The twins *were* growing up, and not even Jax, the ultimate alpha, could stop them, no matter how much he wished he could.

It was well after dark before the twins returned to the ranch. Jax spent the entire time pacing, shooting Dakota black looks, and setting everyone else's teeth on edge. He was worried Mal had taken off, followed by Tai, without a word to anyone. Dakota tried to reason with him, but he was too worried to listen.

"Jax, Mal wouldn't leave without saying goodbye, and even if he did, Tai wouldn't follow him without letting someone know where she was going. They were angry at each other - they probably went for a run to cool off and make up. That's what they always do when they argue," Dakota said.

"I'll hunt their asses down, Dakota, I swear I will! After all these years, after everything we've done for them, if they left this property without saying goodbye, I'll--"

Jax's sentence was cut off by the creak of the front door. Mal and Tai slipped inside, looking surprised to see their parents and uncles waiting for them in the living room.

"Where in the blue hell have you been?" Jax demanded, before the door had even swung shut behind the twins.

"Out for a run," Tai said. Jax noticed her hand link with Mal's; no doubt Dakota had been right and they'd let their horse-selves run free, cooling their tempers.

"Uncle Jax," Mal said, lifting his chin and staring directly into Jax's eyes, "I know what you're going to say. Before you even start, I want you to know that Tai and I talked it over, and I'm going to stay here this winter."

Jax opened his mouth, but nothing came out. His carefully rehearsed lecture, composed in his head over the hours he'd spent pacing awaiting the twins' return, shriveled and died, replaced by an enormous wave of relief. "Good. I'm glad you came to your senses," he mumbled.

"I'm not saying that I'm going to stay here forever, Uncle Jax," Mal continued. He seemed to grow before Jax's eyes, standing taller, straighter, and stronger. Jax was impressed, although he kept it to himself.

Jax's eyes bore into Mal's and Mal returned his glare without flinching. Jax felt pride swell in his heart at the quiet strength in Mal's posture and voice. *I always knew he was a born alpha*, Jax thought, biting back a smile. "Oh?"

Mal nodded. "Someday, I'm going to want to leave. Not forever, just for a while. I want to see the world for myself, see where I fit into the scheme of things. For now, I'm content to stay here, at least for a while."

"It's dangerous out there--" Jax began, his recently forgotten fears resurfacing. Dakota's elbow to his ribs ended his lecture before it could begin. "Okay, okay. We can discuss this later on -- just promise me you'll talk to us before you take it into your head to do anything stupid, okay?"

"Uncle Jax--"

"*Promise* him, Mal!" Tai hissed, shouldering her brother.

"All right! I promise!" Mal said, sighing as if in defeat.

Jax could tell by his posture that Mal wasn't happy, but then again, neither was Jax. He watched the twins climb the stairs up toward their rooms, certain Mal was still entertaining thoughts about leaving the safety of the ranch. There wasn't a damn thing he could do about it, though, short of chaining Mal to his bed.

He sighed, exchanged weary, worried looks with Dakota, Deidre, and Oscar, feeling just as helpless and troubled as they looked.

Chapter Five

After more than two hours of carefully negotiating the treacherous hairpin turns and steep drop-offs along the road up into the Tetons, the turn-off that would lead down to the ranch came into view. The dirt road leading down to the Shifting Sands Ranch wasn't much more than a narrow, long, winding pothole that hammered at the tires of Joseph Wheaton's SUV, and spit rocks up at his undercarriage. He had to swerve often around debris that cluttered the roadway, large branches and the like. It was almost as if the owners of the Shifting Sands didn't want to make it easy for anyone to reach them.

The thought only added to the growing list of suspicions Joe already had about the ranch and its owners.

New to the position of tax assessor for the tiny town of Cedar Creek, Wyoming, Joe took his job -- and himself -- very seriously. He had plans, big plans, and Cedar Creek was only the stepping-off point. Although the town itself wasn't much more than a few blocks of small, family-owned businesses, with a population of just under a couple of thousand residents, it still held claim to jurisdiction over the Shifting Sands.

When he first took office, he was shocked to find how very little anyone really knew about one of the most successful private operations in the state. He immediately made the Shifting Sands a priority, delving back into its property tax history for the last eighteen years. He didn't find anything extraordinary in the paperwork -- most of it was cut and dried, no outstanding liens, no back taxes owed -- but he did find enough odd notations, and heard enough rumors around town to arouse his suspicions.

"Leave 'em be," Ronny Pierpont told him on his first day in office. "They're right pleasant people, and pump a lot of money into the town. Don't go making waves in the pond, son."

His predecessor, Ronny, a man so old he might have been assessing property for Caesar in ancient Rome, was a good ol' boy who spent most of his time sitting with his friends out in front of the Pump UR Own gas station, chewing tobacco and gossiping. He'd warned Joe not to dig too deep, said to leave the boys at the Shifting Sands alone. They were good for business in town, he'd said, poured a lot of money into the local economy. No sense in ruffling feathers by nosing around. The ranch paid their taxes, and what they did up there on their property was their own damn business.

Joe didn't see it that way. There was something fishy going on at the ranch, and he was going to find out exactly what it was, if he had to go over the entire property inch by inch with a magnifying glass.

It was true that he was overstepping his bounds -- not to mention the civil rights of the property owners -- but he didn't care. He wanted to know, *needed* to know the truth behind the Shifting Sands Ranch, and he was going to get his answers even if he had to tread the Constitution into mulch in the process. Whatever secrets the owners of the Shifting Sands were hiding, Joe knew in his gut that exposing them would be front page

news. It'd be his ticket into the political arena, and with it, everything he'd ever dreamed of -- money, power, and women.

He'd sent letters to the owners demanding a meeting so that he might personally assess the property, but he'd never gotten a reply. The bastards probably thought they were above the local tax office's right to inspect their holdings -- or had something to hide.

Well, that's about to change, he thought, skirting a large tree limb that lay across the middle of the road. Let's see them ignore me when I'm knocking at their door with a summons for access to their property! They've got one last chance to cooperate because the next time I have to make this trip, I'm bringing the sheriff with me, and they can cool their pompous asses in the Baker Street jail while I make the inspection!

Although he didn't want to admit it, even to himself, it wasn't just the mystery surrounding the ranch's land that had him making the trip up the mountain. He was more than a little curious about the rumors circulating about its owners, too. While Joe dismissed a great deal of the gossip out-of-hand as claptrap, he knew most stories had at least a kernel of truth to them.

For almost twenty years, townie tongues had wagged about exotic animals spotted roaming the property, beasts having no business being in the mountains of Wyoming. Leopards, tigers, rhinos, and a few things straight out of myth, like dragons and dinosaurs... If Joe believed the tall tales, then every animal once paired up and marched aboard the Ark was running wild in the forests surrounding the Shifting Sands.

He mentioned his concerns to Ronny one day, about six months after Joe had taken office. It was the first and last time he'd sought his predecessor's advice.

"Maybe they're running some sort of wild animal refuge up there, Ronny," Joe said. "That'd be a helluva thing. Or maybe they've got one of those big game hunting operations going. It happens. Seen it on the news a couple of years back. These fellas would chopper in men from all over, let 'em hunt rhino and lions and whatnot. Made a fortune until the Feds shut 'em down."

Ronny spat a wad of chaw into an old Maxwell House coffee can, and cackled. "If they were running a wild life refuge, why on earth would they hide such a thing? There are lots of such places in the States. All they'd need were the right permits to operate one. They could've formed a non-profit and got a huge break on their taxes in the process."

At that point, Elmer Hinkle, owner of the Pump UR own, chimed in. "You've been watching too many of them late night movies, Joe. Big game hunting? Up *here*? Them lions and elephants and whatnot are used to living in jungles -- not the mountains of Wyoming!"

"That's right," Ronny said, shaking an arthritic finger at Joe. "Use the sense the good Lord gave you, Joe. Keep your nose out of the Shifting Sands' business, and just do your

job. You go around making crazy accusations like that, and it could get you in a heap of trouble, boy."

Joe nodded, but privately continued to wonder. Big game hunting would explain both the rumors and the secrecy. If they were to chopper in men with big guns and bigger bank accounts to hunt exotic animals, they'd want to keep it quiet. Animal rights activists would have a field day with them if they found out, never mind the fact that they'd be breaking laws prohibiting the hunting of endangered species. As for the animals not surviving the rough Wyoming winters... well, who knew what the owners of the ranch had in their barns? Could be heated cages in there, for all Joe knew.

There were other rumors, too. Stories that claimed the ranch was actually a cult operating under the guise of a cattle ranch. It certainly wasn't out of the realm of possibility. Hadn't the Feds taken down such a cult somewhere in Texas not too long ago? The ranch's isolation, their unwillingness to allow anyone from the outside onto the property, and their aloofness when in town were all factors that raised a neon-red flag. Although Joe knew that dozens of people worked and lived at the ranch, the fact that the owners never once, to his knowledge at least, hired any townies as employees added to his suspicions that something less-than-savory was afoot.

There were darker tales, too, stories of bizarre sex rituals and devil-worship, of naked men and women dancing and participating in wild orgies under full moons, of black magic and virgin sacrifices. As distasteful and implausible as Joe found the rumors, it was *possible* there might be something to them.

More than likely, Joe thought, they were doing something sedate, if illegal. If not the big-game hunting of endangered species, then maybe they were growing fields of marijuana up there, or brewing up methamphetamine in their barn.

Wouldn't it be the end-all if he could prove any of his suspicions were true? *The media eats up scandals like that*, he thought, *and if I'm the one to break the case, I could use the publicity to run for office in Jackson or Laramie, or even Cheyenne! Why, it could pave a path directly to the governor's office for me!*

Finally, he came to a fence. It was flanked by two "Private Property -- No Trespassing," and "No Soliciting" signs in neon orange affixed to a tall fence topped with razor wire. A small keypad and gray intercom were bolted to a short wooden post on the left-hand side of the gate.

For a fucking cattle ranch, they sure have some high-tech security, he thought.

He pulled up to the post, threw the SUV in park, rolled down his window, and punched the "Call" button on the intercom.

"All deliveries have to be scheduled in advance," a disembodied voice said. "You need to call ahead."

"I'm not making a delivery. My name is Joseph Wheaton, and I'm the tax assessor for Cedar Creek. I need to speak to the owners at once."

"You need to call and make an appointment."

"I've already tried that. All I get is an answering machine, and no one ever returns my calls. My letters go unanswered. I demand to speak to whoever's in charge down there!" Joe said, pouring every ounce of authority into his voice that he could muster.

"Sorry, but that's not possible. You'd best turn around sir, and head back into town."

Joe felt his blood pressure rise, a dull pain throbbing at his temples. "Now, you listen here! I have a summons signed by a circuit court judge giving me access to this property for the purposes of assessment. You tell Wells and Greene to let me in immediately, or I'll have no recourse but to leave and return with the sheriff! So help me, I'll have every soul down on that ranch arrested for being in contempt of a court order, including you!" He heard a whirring sound, and spotted a tiny camera perched high on the fence swing in his direction. He leaned out of the window, waving his summons and glaring at it.

"Just a minute, please," the voice said after a pregnant pause.

Joe sat back, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel, waiting. He chewed the inside of his cheek, impatient to begin, wondering if they'd have the balls to send him away. If they did, he'd have no choice but to go home and wait until tomorrow to return with the sheriff, who wouldn't be eager to make the long trip up into the mountains for something as trivial as a property inspection. Besides, he didn't want the sheriff breathing down his neck while he inspected the ranch. Joe didn't want to wait -- he wanted in *now*.

"Come on through, sir. Be careful, the road down to the ranch ain't much more than a deer trail."

Suddenly the gate began to swing inward. He put the SUV into gear and drove slowly past the fence. The way in was far narrower and much less friendly than even the main road had been, pitted and steep, pocketed with mud, strewn with gravel and small branches. He found it necessary to put the SUV into four-wheel drive to negotiate it. The forested area was close, tree limbs scraping the windows and scratching the paintjob of his vehicle. He swore every foot of the way down.

The path threaded its way down the side of the mountain, often at such a steep angle that gravity pushed Joe's chest against his seat belt harness. Eventually, the road ended at another fence, twice as tall as the last, and clearly electrified. A guard shack stood just to the side of another gate.

Good God! Joe thought, eyeing the yellow-and-black "Caution: 10,000 Volts!" signs posted to the fence. *What the Hell are they protecting in there?*

The guard, a tall, thin man with steely gray eyes dressed in worn jeans and a red flannel shirt, held his hand out. "I'll need to see that summons, sir." Joe recognized the voice as the man he'd spoken to over the intercom.

Joe thrust it through the window, and watched as the guard disappeared into his shack with it. The guard picked up the phone and spoke to someone, obviously reading the summons to whomever he'd called. He returned after a few minutes, and handed the paper back to Joe. He didn't look any friendlier than he'd been before; as a matter of fact, he looked downright surly.

"Go on in. Take the left-hand fork. It'll lead you to the main house. Mr. Wells and Mr. Greene are waiting for you there."

He noted the emphasis the guard put on the salutations of Wells' and Greene's surnames. Joe was already familiar with the names of the owners of the ranch – they were on his summons. His guess was that the guard was reminding him to respect the fact that they owned the whole shebang.

Well, as far as Joe was concerned, *Mister Wells* and *Mister Greene* had better remember who *he* was, too, and respect *his* office, or else no bank accounts or holdings would keep him from suggesting a full audit of their finances. Never mind that their property taxes were technically his only concern. He knew a few people who worked for the government. With one well-placed phone call, he'd bring the whole of the IRS down on their heads. Then they'd be sorry.

Grunting at the guard, snatching his summons back, Joe rolled up his window and proceeded past the gate. The road was much better on this side of the fence; paved and smooth. It was long, leading up and over a small hill and looping partway around pasture before it sloped to a fork; he took the left-hand path as instructed, noting the right led to a series of low bunkhouses and log cabins, and beyond them, corrals, barns, and other outbuildings.

Two men were standing on the front porch of the attractive, cedar-shingled, two-story ranch house when he arrived. One was tall and broad through the shoulders, with shaggy, dark hair. The other was slighter, rangy-looking, with a shock of short, salt-and-pepper hair. Neither looked particularly pleased to see him. He parked, taking several moments to re-fold the summons and collect his briefcase -- no sense in letting them think he was anxious. *Let 'em wait*, he thought. *Sweat it out.*

"Mr. Wells? Mr. Greene? I'm Joseph Wheat-"

"We know who you are. What we don't know is why you're here," Greene growled.

"Jax! Behave yourself. I'm sure Mr. Wheaton has a good reason," Wells chided Greene. He turned liquid brown eyes on Joe. "What can we do for you, Joe?"

Joe's spine straightened at the informality. He was a significant man with an important job; Wells' use of his first name without as much as a by-your-leave, was irritating and belittling. He frowned, approaching the porch, and ignored Well's proffered hand. "I'm not here on a social call, *Mr.* Wells. I'm here to assess your property," he said without preamble. "It's our belief that improvements have been made without proper permits, nor with said improvements being reported to the tax collector's office."

"Dakota..." Greene was bristling; Joe could see the hostility flashing in his green eyes. Joe took that as a good sign -- why else would the man be angry if he weren't hiding something?

"Let the man speak, Jax," Wells said.

"There's nothing wrong with our taxes. I did them myself," Greene grumbled. Joe could swear the man was baring his teeth, like a dog... or a wolf.

It was true, of course. No matter how much Joe dug into the records, there didn't seem to be anything incongruous about them. There wasn't really anything to suggest any unreported improvements -- he remembered seeing documents about the road and outbuildings. He wasn't really there to question their taxes -- he was there to uncover the truth about the cloak of rumors that surrounded the place, and hopefully, find something juicy enough to get his name in the papers.

His first impression was sorely disappointing. The Shifting Sands Ranch -- on the surface, at least -- looked like any other large cattle operation: pastures, herds of cattle, a few horses, barns, outbuildings, certainly no exotic animals, pot fields, or groups of fornicating Satan-worshippers anywhere he could see.

Not that he'd expected to walk onto the set of a stag film. They'd had ample time to hide evidence of any salacious activities as he'd been negotiating the narrow trail down from the main road, but Joe was sure that if such goings-on were indeed occurring, he'd find evidence of it somewhere. He reminded himself to be patient and to stay alert.

"I beg to differ, Mr. Greene," Joe said, rustling his summons. Old Judge Anderson, a lifelong friend of Joe's father, and whom Joe had caddied for in his youth, had signed the summons for him without question after a friendly round of golf and a few bourbons at the club. The old fool hadn't even read the damn thing, just as Joe had hoped. "I believe there may be a problem here."

"What *kind* of a problem?" Wells asked. He tossed a worried glance at Greene. "Maybe we should hire a lawyer."

An attorney would have Joe's bullshit summons shredded into confetti before he could say *habeas corpus*. "No, no. I came here so that we could avoid any nastiness, Mr. Wells. Let's keep it friendly, shall we? All you have to do is let me inspect the property, beginning with the house. That's all. I'll confirm that everything is accounted for and be on my way."

"Jax?" Wells asked, looking at his partner.

Greene didn't look happy in the least, but he nodded and motioned for Joe to follow them into the house.

Chapter Six

To his knowledge, Joe was the first townie to set foot inside the ranch house at Shifting Sands aside from rare visits by the sheriff, and his eyes tried to be everywhere at once, taking in as many details as possible. He was surprised at how quickly Wells and Greene had accepted his lies, considering he had no real reason to inspect the *inside* of the house. All he needed to know he could get from an inspection of the outside of the property. Evidently, they didn't know that, and he didn't enlighten them on it.

Two more men stood at the base of the stairway to his right. One was slender, golden, and looked to be in his early thirties. His amber-colored eyes were sharp; Joe knew instinctively they would miss nothing. The other was taller, older, and so pale he looked more ghost than man. His eyes were so light a blue they appeared nearly colorless; his hair was pure white. Both were glaring at him. The air around them crackled with barely suppressed hostility.

"Aiden, Ghost, why don't you go check with Jolly and see what supplies he needs for the round-up," Wells said. He positioned his large body between Joe and the other two men, but whether to block them from Joe's sight or him from theirs was unclear. They left as silently as wraiths, slipping out the front door, and Joe felt immeasurably, if inexplicably, relieved when the door shut behind them. *Creepy*, Joe thought. *What other kind of freaks do they have living out here?* He dismissed them from his mind and turned his attention back to the inspection.

The living room was well-appointed, in a homey sort of way, with a huge fieldstone fireplace and comfortable sofas. He was struck by the obvious lack of hunting trophies -- mounted heads and the like -- which were staples in nearly every other ranch in the area. Even Joe's grandmother's cottage held its share of deer antlers and stuffed fish.

What happened next completely cleared his mind of big-game hunting, marijuana farmers, or naked orgies. He stood transfixed, unable to stop staring.

A girl dashed in from another room, probably the kitchen, wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Her cheeks were flushed as if she'd been exercising, her eyes sparkling. She was incredibly beautiful, with long hair so pale it was nearly white, and large, expressive, green eyes. Joe couldn't stop staring at her, and nearly stumbled into Well's back when Greene and Wells stopped moving.

He'd never seen a woman so lovely. Her skin was smooth and creamy; hair falling in a shimmering, silken curtain to her waist. Small breasts, exquisitely formed, thrust at the thin material of her T-shirt; he could see her nipples pressing against the fabric. Softly rounded hips and long, shapely legs were encased by thin denim. She was willowy, fragile, ethereal, and yet carried an air of strength about her.

"Mal's on his way, Uncle Jax. He says he wants to ride fence," she said, stopping short when she saw Joe. Surprisingly, she wasn't startled to see a stranger in their home. She

grinned at him, as if delighted to see him. "Hi, I'm Tai. Welcome to the Shifting Sands. There's always room for one more here, as Uncle Dakota always says. What are you?" she asked. "I'm a--"

"Tai, this is Mr. Wheaton, the tax man from town," Wells said, cutting her off.

Joe detected a warning in Wells' voice, and saw a look of fear ghost over Tai's beautiful face. *What's going on here? What was she going to say? Why did she ask what I am, instead of who I am?*

"Oh," Tai said, blinking rapidly. "I... uh... it was nice to meet you, Mr. Wheaton. I'd better go see if I can help Mom in the kitchen." She smiled once more, much more tentatively than before, and disappeared back the way she'd come.

Wells cleared this throat. "Where do you want to start, Joe?" he asked, sounding uncomfortable. He tapped Joe on the shoulder, and Joe nearly shot out of his shorts.

He realized he'd been mesmerized, staring at the spot where Tai had disappeared. He couldn't help it; as curious as he was about the ranch, as suspicious as he was, the girl interested him much more. He hadn't expected to find such a beauty here in the isolated mountains, and definitely not one who had a smile that made all the blood in his body rush directly to his cock.

Joe knew he wasn't much to look at. He was short and skinny -- a front and back without any sides was what his Ma used to say when he was a little boy. His eyes were a muddy brown, and his skin, sallow and pockmarked. His hair began falling out when he was eighteen, and now, at twenty-seven, he was nearly bald. Most women wouldn't give him the time of day. They looked the other way when he smiled at them, pretending not to see him.

Tai hadn't looked away.

Tai had looked right at him, and smiled.

Suddenly, Joe didn't really care about seeing the property. He wanted to see Tai again, to see that smile. She wanted him; he could tell that right off. No woman smiled at a man like that unless they wanted to get into his pants. A woman had two smiles, Daddy used to say, a church smile and a whore smile.

That hadn't been a church smile. No siree, bob.

"Let's start over here," Joe said, heading in the direction Tai had gone, leaving Wells and Greene no option but to follow him.

The kitchen was stainless steel and very modern, but Joe barely noticed. Tai wasn't there, but another, older woman was, and she scarcely glanced at Joe. She gave a curt nod, and

left, and he dismissed her from his mind. *Where had Tai gone? Was she playing hard to get?* The thought made Joe angry -- why smile at him like that and then disappear? Was she nothing but a cocktease?

Of course, that was it! She'd played him for a fool, smiling at him like she wanted to rip his clothes off and ride him right there in the living room, then running away. She was just another bitch, like the rest of them. A familiar fist of anger clenched his stomach, twisting it.

"What would you like to see next?" Wells asked, tapping Joe on the shoulder again.

Joe started. His mind was so absorbed with the girl that he'd nearly forgotten Wells and Greene were with him. "The rest of the house," he said gruffly, pulling a notebook out of his pocket. He'd find her again. She was somewhere on the property. She couldn't hide forever.

Wells and Greene led Joe through room after room. He pretended to check each one thoroughly, opening closet doors and rapping on walls, as though he suspected they had hidden rooms behind the drywall. He supposed they thought he was crazy, but he didn't care. He needed to buy time, to give Tai a chance to come to her senses and return.

She didn't, and he grew angrier by the minute.

The big house had twelve bedrooms and four bathrooms -- not counting the master -- most of them very small, some obvious add-ons. The master bedroom was the most expansive, dominated by a huge four poster bed. He wondered briefly which of the owners had claimed it, but decided Wells, based on his physical size, must sleep there. He was a big man; therefore it would make sense for him to have an equally large bedroom.

The bathroom in the master bedroom was much larger than any of the others, indeed, larger than Joe's entire bedroom at home. It was very modern; the large, sunken spa tub and glass shower stall with four heads were a definite upgrade compared to the other, older bathrooms.

He knew Tai's room the moment he entered it. Although it was the same size as most of the other bedrooms, it reminded Joe of her -- light and airy, soft and warm. A canopy bed made over with white eyelet sat against one wall, piled high with stuffed animals. A delicately carved wood dresser and a vanity with an oval mirror were the only other pieces of furniture in the room, aside from a white wicker rocking chair in one corner. Beneath his feet was an oval, braided rag rug in deep rose. Tai's scent, or what he concluded was hers, filled the air. Sweet and flowery, it reminded Joe of summer, of gardens in full bloom.

What did Tai do on that bed, he wondered? More importantly, who did she do it with? Had she smiled her whore smile at any of the ranch hands and spread her legs for them

under that pristine white coverlet? Maybe the man with the golden eyes was her lover. Surely she wouldn't have chosen the ghost-like man -- although he knew women like Tai were less than picky about whom they fucked.

Bitch. Whore.

Daddy used to say that Joe's Ma was a whore, too. That's why she'd left them when Joe was still a boy. Daddy had said so over and over again. Women used men like that. They flashed a pretty whore smile, spread their legs and trapped a man between them. Then, once they'd sucked every drop of life out, they left him to find new men to ensnare.

They were all alike, Daddy said, bitches, every one. Church smiles and whore smiles, looking at a man and getting him hard, then running off, leaving him behind to fend for himself and the rug rats they shit out.

Like Ma had run from Daddy.

Like Tai had run from Joe.

He glanced out of the window. From the second story, he had a view of the valley and could see the glinting metal of the electrified fence snaking through the forest in the distance.

The idea came to him like a light flicking on in the darkness. At that moment he knew exactly what he had to do. It wasn't right for Tai to lead him on the way she had. It was dangerous. Other men might not be as understanding as Joe. Somebody had to teach her a lesson for her own good, and Joe would be the one to do it. He'd come back, and he'd show her what a real man did when a woman flashed a whore's smile at him.

She'll like it, too, he thought, feeling his lips curve into a smile, and his cock fill.

Tai isn't like the others, he told himself. She would learn, she'd understand. She wouldn't scream. He wouldn't have to hurt her to make her shut up, like he had the others. After he was done, when she realized what he did was only for her own good, she'd love him, and never leave again.

Once she loved him, she'd tell him about the ranch's secrets, too. She was an innocent in all of it, he could see it right off, forced to remain on the ranch by her parents, or the owners. He'd rescue her, free her, and she'd be so grateful! She'd make a pretty wife, standing at his elbow when he was elected governor. She wouldn't run away like his Ma. He wouldn't let her, even if she tried.

Turning to Wells, Joe snapped his notebook shut. "It's getting late, and it'll be dark soon. I'll have to come back to finish the assessment on the property and outbuildings."

He didn't miss the twin looks of relief on Wells' and Greene's faces, or how quickly they led him back downstairs and out to the porch, as if anxious to get rid of him. "By the way, gentlemen, I don't recall seeing a report in the files on the electrified fence. I'll have to check to be sure, of course, but if there's no record of a permit, the fence will have to be deactivated until one can be secured. I'll be in touch." He jumped into his SUV and started it up, throwing it in gear and backing away from the house, oblivious to Wells' and Greene's protests.

He had no idea if there was such a report, but if one existed, he'd make sure it disappeared. He would pay another visit to his friend, the judge, and ask him for a court order. The old coot could barely see to read the documents he signed; he would give Joe whatever Joe wanted, and what he wanted was for the juice to be cut to the fence. The next time Joe came up to the Shifting Sands Ranch, no one was going to know he was there.

Only Tai would know, and by the time *she* found out, it would be too late.

He grinned all the way back to the main road, and was still smiling when he pulled into his driveway a couple of hours later, his mind already compiling a list of the things he'd need to get.

Chapter Seven

Nex was feeling restless, pacing back and forth across the rickety porch of the cabin. Perhaps it was the stifling heat -- the summer had been a particularly warm one with frequent, heavy rains that made steam rise from the hot, stagnant waters of the swamp. Or maybe it was the hunger that rumbled in his belly that had him edgy.

Although he and his twin brother, Caedes, went out every day at sunset, prey was far scarcer than Nex could ever remember. The only living creatures they'd been able to catch in the past week were a couple of snakes, and a turtle that had been as tough and tasteless as an old boot. There was nothing else around, unless you counted the thousands of mosquitoes that swarmed through the air of the swamp like a living cloud. Even the gators knew enough to give the raptors a wide berth.

Gar kept the shelves in the shack filled with canned foods -- beans, tuna, and stew -- but nothing could replace fresh, hot blood and flesh. Nex liked his food still kicking when he took his first bite. Caedes wasn't as particular -- he'd eat anything, dead or alive. Then again, Caedes was the weaker of the two, in Nex's opinion. Sometimes Nex thought Caed would be content to eat burgers and hot dogs for the rest of his life.

Nex, on the other hand, lived for the hunt, but aside from rare excursions north to the forests in Ocala, he was forced to subsist on canned meats and whatever pitiful fare he could catch in the swamps of the Everglades. The wildlife in the area had grown sly over the years; they'd become very adept at hiding themselves and their scents from Nex and Caedes. Nothing lived in the immediate area surrounding the cabin anymore. Hunting was becoming difficult and they returned empty-handed and still hungry more often than not.

It was taking a toll on him. Nex was a predator -- the Ultimate Predator -- and needed to hunt to feed, but Gar refused to take them north more often. They weren't ready, Gar said. They needed to mature first, to be at their physical peak before leaving the safety of the swamp and taking their place at the top of the food chain.

Bullshit, Nex thought. *We are at our peak. We're ready. We're young, fast, strong, and hungry! Gar just doesn't want to give up his control over us.* He eyed Caedes, who sat on the opposite end of the porch, whittling. Although Nex hadn't spoken, Caedes turned toward him, dark eyes curious. They were so attuned to one another that it sometimes seemed they could read each other's thoughts.

"What's wrong?" Caed asked, laying aside the knife and block of wood.

"What do you think?" Nex replied. He snorted and resumed his pacing. "I'm fucking hungry, Caed! How can you sit there, whittling like an old man? Sitting here doing nothing is driving me crazy! We need to hunt."

"We *did* hunt, last night."

"Yeah, and what did we catch? Nothing! Not even a fucking gator."

"What are you saying, Nex?" Caedes asked, his sleek, dark brows knitting.

Nex braced his arms against the porch railing, muscles and tendons straining with the tightness of his grip. He stared out into the swamp, but his mind saw beyond the cypress trees and ferns to a world teeming with prey. "It's time, that's what I'm saying. We need to move, to get out into the world and claim what's ours."

"Gar says--"

"Gar is a cheetah, a fucking *housecat* compared to us! Why do we still allow him to order us around? Why are you so afraid of him?"

Caedes rose to his feet, squaring off against Nex. "I'm not afraid of him. I'm not afraid of anybody or anything!" His pupils elongated for an instant, his eye color shifting from black to blood red.

Nex smiled. "Good. Then you agree its time for us to make our move?"

Caedes looked at the cabin's door. "Maybe. Where would we go first?"

"You know where."

"Wyoming? Why, Nex? Gar's been preaching to us about revenge since we were old enough to understand, but we didn't even *know* Cain. Why go all that way to avenge his death?"

"Cain was our father, and they murdered him!" Nex hissed. He felt the Change pushing against his skin, and fought it back. "The bear and the wolf and the rest of their menagerie are living up there, enjoying their lives. They have everything they could possibly want, Caed -- food, money, power, women -- *everything*. What do we have? Snakes and fucking mosquitoes! Cain should have left us the world but instead, because of the shifters at that ranch we've been forced to spend our lives out here in the middle of nowhere, scrounging for meals! It's not fair, Caed. Gar is right about that much. *We're* the Ultimate Predators, you and me, not them! We deserve to be at the top of the food chain, and it's time we took back what belongs to us!"

Caedes nodded slowly. "Maybe you're right. Okay, let's do it. When do you want to go?"

"Now. Yesterday! Come on. We'll tell Gar, and pack our things."

"He's not going to like it, Nex. What if he says no?"

Nex smiled, a raptor's grin full of suddenly sharp teeth. "Then we'll get to start our journey with full bellies. I've heard cheetah tastes just like chicken."

Gar sat in the backseat of the Ford pickup, sullen and silent. He hadn't spoken a word since they'd left the Everglades, heading north on Interstate 75. He'd argued, cajoled, threatened, and done everything short of pulling a gun on the twins, but he couldn't talk them out of leaving. Only when Nex and Caedes' eyes glowed red and their teeth began to elongate did he rethink his position and agree.

It was that, or become lunch for a pair of hungry raptors.

They weren't ready to take on the Shifting Sands. Hell, their father had been twice their size and age, but because he'd been as arrogant as his sons, he'd died.

Of course, the fact that Gar had a hand in his death was a secret Gar would take to his grave. Nex and Caedes would disembowel him if they ever found out he'd plotted against their father. No, the story he'd always told them was the one he was sticking to; they'd never know the truth. The only ones who did know were the wolf and bear, and the others at the ranch, and the twins would never take their word over Gar's.

Gar's plan from the beginning had been to take over leadership of the Ultimate Predators Pack by getting rid of Cain. In the middle of the chaos at the Shifting Sands Ranch, while Cain was distracted by the bear and the wolf, Gar had turned his gun on Cain.

After all, even a fifteen-foot Tyrannosaurus Rex could be taken down by a bullet, if the caliber was big enough.

It hadn't worked. Oh, Gar had slowed Cain down, for sure, but it was the damn wolf who'd found the grenades in Gar's saddlebag and ended Cain's life with them. Gar knew when to cut his losses and run. He'd gone swiftly, as fast as his cheetah could take him, melting into the brush, and hadn't looked back.

Now, eighteen years later, there was no Pack left to take over. Everyone had scattered to the wind after Cain's death. Gar simply wasn't strong enough to hold them together. Each member was a predator; alphas fought alphas, betas tried to claw their way to the top spot -- it was a bloodbath that turned the swamp red. In the end, the survivors had left, leaving Gar alone to lick his wounds.

He remained in the godforsaken swamp, raising Cain's children, filling their heads with lies from the moment they opened their eyes and he saw them for what they were. He'd fed them, taught them to control their shifting abilities, to hunt, to be fearless, to be merciless; every moment of their young lives was spent training them for their ultimate destiny.

Revenge, not for Cain's death, but for Gar's lost dreams of power.

He placed all the blame squarely at the feet of the shifters at the ranch. Gar told Nex and Caedes that their father had been a great man, a warrior, a visionary. The shifters at the ranch had been jealous, and plotted against Cain. They'd made raids on the Predators, killing without reason or remorse.

"He took as much as any man could, but when they attacked the Pack and killed your mother -- you were just babies, defenseless little babies, and they almost killed you, too -- Cain went after them. He went to the ranch, but there were too many of them, armed to the fucking teeth. They killed him in cold blood and laughed as he died."

Lies, all of it, but the twins didn't know the difference. They'd actually been born after Cain died -- he'd never known he'd finally sired children with his unique shifting ability. Gar had repeated the story to the twins word-for-word, every night at bedtime since they were babies. It was the only bedtime story in Gar's repertoire, and by the time they were three, they knew it verbatim. He supposed he was the cause of some of the nightmares that plagued them as children, but that was just too fucking bad. *Grow up and get tough*, he'd told them when they'd climbed into his bed, snotty-nosed and wailing. *You're dinosaurs, not wimpy little mice.*

In reality, Cain had been insane, and Gar knew it. Cain was a throwback to the age of the dinosaurs, confident that he would usher in a new Jurassic period by spawning an entire herd of Tyrannosaurs like himself. He *was* a visionary -- that much was true -- but his vision was a nightmare; an army of creatures like himself, and the entire planet turned into one giant smorgasbord. He'd gone up to the ranch for no reason other than to kill every last male shifter, and take the females for himself as breeders.

Did Nex and Caedes even have a plan? Gar doubted it, and hadn't bothered to ask -- yet. He needed them to cool off, to settle down, and listen to reason. Gar needed to find some of the other shifters from the old Ultimate Predators. He wanted at least a handful of them at his back when they took on the ranch. He didn't really care if the twins died in the fight, as long as they took out Jax and Dakota first. Gar was certain he could wrestle control of the ranch from the others once the bear and wolf were gone, but he had to make sure the leaders were out of the way first.

Hell, if Gar was lucky, maybe the bear and the wolf were dead already. It *had* been almost twenty years since the battle at the ranch. A lot might have happened up there since then. All he knew about it was what he'd gleaned from the odd mention now and then in the financial section of the newspaper -- the Shifting Sands was doing very well, profit-wise. If that were the case, if Jax and Dakota *were* dead, then he'd let Nex and Caedes take out as many of the others as they could before being killed themselves. With the door wide open for leadership, Gar would slip comfortably into the throne. He would rule a Pack yet -- at this point, he didn't really care if it was a Pack of predators or prey, ultimate or otherwise.

His dream would never be realized if Nex and Caedes went in now. They weren't ready -- they were too headstrong and arrogant. They'd make mistakes, and with only Gar to back them up, they were doomed to fail.

They were nearing Ocala, and the National forest. He knew without being told that they'd stop there; he could practically hear the twins' stomachs growling from the backseat. *Once they're sated on a fresh kill, they'll be more compliant, he thought. Maybe I can talk some sense into them then.*

He turned his attention to the rolling green outside the window, and began to formulate a plan.

Chapter Eight

Aiden let his head fall back, tendons in his neck straining as he rode Ghost's thick cock. His hands gripped Ghost's shoulders, feeling the strong muscles move under his smooth skin. Aiden's eyes were closed, but if they'd been open, he knew they'd be golden in color. His eagle was rising to the surface, gliding on the currents of intense pleasure.

It was always like this when he made love with Ghost, no matter where they were, but Aiden loved it best when they were alone and away from the ranch, with no one to overhear, and no need to hold back.

Nobody had ever made Aiden fly, not the way Ghost did; even the lightest of touches, the briefest of kisses made him soar. Sometimes it felt as if Ghost were treating Aiden's body like a piece of delicate porcelain, touching him gently, reverently, while at other times, Ghost was like an animal rutting on pure instinct, wild and unpredictable, and utterly magnificent. Either way, Ghost never failed to make Aiden feel wholly desirable and incredibly special, connecting with Aiden in a way he'd never dreamt possible. Ghost didn't just touch Aiden's body, or his heart -- Ghost touched his *soul*, his innermost core.

He shifted his position a little, until he felt Ghost's cock brush the spot deep inside his body that sent him spiraling out of control. He cried out as he came, and in his voice, he heard his eagle's scream echoing in the forest.

Beneath him, Ghost roared, his hips pumping upward. His hands cupped Aiden's face, pulling him down for a deep kiss. Ghost's fingers slid to the back of his head, twisting in Aiden's hair as he shot his load. Nothing felt better to Aiden than a healthy dose of Ghost's hot juice heating him from the inside out, or seeing the ecstasy that colored Ghost's pale features, especially knowing Aiden was the one who put it there.

Making love with Ghost in the forest just out of sight of the road and well beyond the safety of the perimeter fence of the ranch was a secret vice they shared. For Aiden, it was the danger, the possibility of being found out, seen by human eyes -- unlikely, considering how isolated they were, even outside of the ranch's property line, but still possible -- that made it so exciting. Privately, Aiden thought it was the small act of defiance against Jax and Dakota rather than the possibility of being caught that did it for Ghost.

Ghost's white tiger was an alpha, after all. Aiden knew the difficulty Ghost'd had for the last eighteen years. It was a continuous struggle to obey orders from Jax, no matter how casually given. He did it, every time, but Aiden knew his compliance came at a cost to Ghost's pride, and the fact that Aiden knew he was the reason Ghost stayed at the ranch made him love Ghost all the more.

It was easier for Aiden. His eagle didn't worry about hierarchy. Eagles didn't flock. His human self was happy enough to stay on the ranch, and his eagle was satisfied being mated to Ghost. Besides, he could always take to the sky if he felt too penned in. Not that

he ever had, or even seriously considered it except for short flights -- he'd never leave Ghost behind. Knowing he could if he chose to, though, alleviated any feelings of claustrophobia. It had always been Aiden's choice to stay at the ranch because of the acceptance he'd found with the other members. They were the closest Aiden had ever come to having a loving family. Ghost stayed because Aiden stayed.

Then of course, there was always the Other...

No one, not even Jax or Dakota, would fuck with the Other. If Aiden *really* wanted to, he could easily have taken control of the ranch and everyone in it, based on the Other's sheer size and ferocity. There was no tongue-twisting, zoological, Latin name for Aiden's secondary shifting form. The closest anyone could come to describing it was part Pterodactyl, part dragon.

He didn't even like to think about the Other. No one else could shift into two different animals. It was a side of himself he preferred to keep buried -- in fact, he hadn't shifted into the Other since the day Cain had attacked the ranch.

Aiden was Cain's cousin, raised in the same cult by a group of scientists-turned-religious fanatics who believed they could bring about the end of the world by biologically creating the new Antichrist.

Cain hadn't been born a natural shifter, but Aiden had, and as a result, had two animal forms. Their chromosomes had been methodically tinkered with; their aunt, a research scientist, had scrambled their DNA while they were still in the womb. She'd documented cases of shifter-ability, but the scientific world had discredited her work, and she'd finally lost her mind because of it. She was convinced it was up to her to perfect the course Nature had taken.

She believed she'd failed with Aiden, but succeeded with Cain. Aiden had been extremely careful that his aunt never found out about the Other.

Cain had truly been the Beast the cult wished for -- a creature without conscience, without remorse, incapable of any emotion beyond bloodlust. Aiden's Other, for all its size and power, was still *Aiden*, and ruled by Aiden's rational mind. He would rather kill himself than hurt the ones he loved. Still, sometimes he worried that the Other might someday slip past his control, and he'd become like Cain. He didn't like to talk about that, not even with Ghost, but somehow, Ghost always knew when Aiden's thoughts took that dark path.

"Hey, where'd you go just now?" Ghost's voice was soft, and a small, concerned frown crinkled his forehead. One hand cupped Aiden's chin, forcing Aiden's attention back on him. "You're thinking about *him* again, aren't you?"

Aiden leaned his forehead against Ghost's, his fingers playing with a strand of Ghost's pure white hair. It felt like silk between Aiden's fingers. "We need to get dressed and get

going. The sun will be directly overhead soon, and there's not enough tree cover here. You'll burn." The sun was Ghost's enemy -- his skin had so little pigmentation that even a few minutes under its rays would cause him a painful burn. Aiden tried to distract Ghost by being solicitous, but Ghost was having none of it. *Stubborn tiger. Stubborn, wonderful tiger*, Aiden thought, *and mine. All mine.*

"Don't change the subject. Aiden, you have to let it go. It wasn't your fault you and Cain were born into the same family. It wasn't your fault that he was crazy, and it certainly wasn't your fault he tried to kill everybody. You. Are. Not. Like. Him. Got it? Jesus, Aiden, he died almost twenty years ago! Let it go."

"I know, I know! I just can't help it, Ghost. I don't have an answer for so many questions. What if I lose control of the Other? What if Cain reproduced? What if his spawn are out there right now? I wish we knew for sure. I wish Jax and Dakota would've agreed to chase the Predators back to their lair, to clean them out once and for all. I wish--"

"If wishes were fishes, we'd all be up to our ears in sardines." Ghost's gentle laughter reached into Aiden's heart. "You said it yourself, Aiden -- Cain wasn't a natural shifter. He was genetically altered. He *couldn't* reproduce, at least not to spawn more T-Rexes."

"We don't know that for sure."

Ghost sighed and pushed himself up, resting his arm on a bent knee. "Aiden, it's over. It's *been* over. You're the only one keeping Cain alive, and he's eating you up from the inside out. It has to stop. As far as the Other goes, you're one of the most decent men I've ever met, shifter or human. The Other can't take control, because even if it's *bigger*, you're *stronger*."

Aiden nodded in defeat, and summoned a smile. "Yeah, you're right. Of course, you're right! I'm just being paranoid. Come on, let's get dressed and get moving. Our list of supplies won't buy themselves, and if we dawdle much longer, the stores will be closed before we can get down to town. Not to mention, you really will get sunburned out here."

Ghost snorted, pulling Aiden in for a scorching kiss. His hand slipped around Aiden's hip, fingers teasing at his ass. "Dawdle? Is that what we were doing? Wasting time?"

"Keep that up and I'll be ready for Round Two, and you'll be a crispy critter before we get into town," Aiden said, laughing and sliding away from Ghost's probing fingers. "Look at you -- you're turning red already."

That much was true -- Ghost's alabaster skin was tinting pink, even in the dappled shade of the forest edging the road. He burned so easily; his skin so white, that no amount of SPF lotion would protect it for long if exposed to the sun. He and Aiden did their chores at the ranch at night, for that reason. When they couldn't and had to be out in the daytime, he often traveled in his white tiger form, although he tended to overheat quickly with his heavy fur.

My poor Ghost, Aiden thought, kissing him again. *He just can't win for losing*. Luckily, the truck had heavily tinted windows and air conditioning. He smiled and got dressed as Ghost flashed into his tiger-form.

It was the smallest of sounds that caught Aiden's ear, and he froze. His eyes flashed golden, his eagle screaming to the surface just under his skin, on full alert. Deeper yet, in the darker parts of himself, the Other stirred awake. Signaling Ghost to stay still, he turned, slowly scanning the surrounding vegetation. His keen eyesight, capable of spotting a scurrying rodent from several hundred feet in the air, picked out a shape hiding in the brush about fifty feet away.

Ghost's tiger was crouched low, ready to spring, his tail swishing ominously from side to side. Aiden placed a calming hand on Ghost's head before taking a few steps in the direction of the mysterious shape. He hadn't gone four or five paces when the figure sprang up, hands held out as if to protect himself.

He was a young man, no more than twenty, dressed in a raggedy T-shirt and dirty, torn jeans. *He looks like a drifter. The kid must've been on the road for a while*, Aiden thought, sniffing delicately at the air. He was dirty, unshaven, and reeked of perspiration. The only thing stronger than the smell of his unwashed body was the fear that permeated his every pore. Its cloying tang drifted to Aiden on the breeze.

"Who are you?" Aiden asked, stepping in front of Ghost. Ghost's tiger tended to bite first, and question the pieces later -- not that there were usually any left in any condition to answer.

"T-Taylor. Who are you? How did he do that?" The kid struggled to stand taller, and fixed a menacing look on his face.

False bravado, Aiden thought, suppressing a smile. *He's scared shitless of us*. He was surprised the kid didn't turn tail and run since he *had* seen Ghost shift into his tiger. It made Aiden wonder, and he sniffed the air again. There, under the sweat and fear, he smelled the coppery tang of blood, and realized why the kid was holding his ground -- he couldn't run. He was hurt.

Now what were they supposed to do? Ordinarily, they'd let the kid go, knowing no one in their right minds would believe him if he spoke about a run-in with a guy and his pet white tiger, particularly since the kid didn't look like a pillar of the community. Rumors of exotic animals had been floating around about the ranch for as long as it had been in existence. None of the townies believed in any of them. In fact, the locals loved the stories -- they added to the mystique of the area. The townsfolk routinely regaled tourists with legends of the amazing creatures that supposedly ran wild in their mountains.

"How badly are you injured?" Aiden called, ignoring the soft growl from Ghost. They simply couldn't, in good conscience, leave Taylor to bleed out in the forest.

"I'm not. How the fuck did he change like that? Answer me!"

"Never mind, how -- it's none of your business, but my friend here can smell the blood on you, kid."

Ghost, growling, butted Aiden's knee with his head, nearly knocking Aiden's leg out from under him. "Knock it off, Ghost," he hissed, tightening his fingers in Ghost's fur. "Come on, Taylor. Answer me. How badly are you hurt?"

"I-I'm shot. Are you like... witches or something?"

He rolled his eyes and ignored Taylor's question, replying with another of his own. "Are you on the run?" If Taylor was wanted by the police, he could bleed all over the state as far as Aiden was concerned, because Aiden wouldn't lift a finger to help him. No matter how much he hated to turn his back on someone in need, he wouldn't bring the law to the doorstep of the Shifting Sands. At best, he'd drive Taylor into town and dump him on the sheriff's lap.

"No! Shit!" Taylor swore, and slumped to the ground. "It hurts like a bitch!"

"Who shot you?"

"I don't know! Last night, I was camped out on that ridge over there. This morning, I was picking some blackberries for breakfast, and I heard a noise. Next thing I knew, I was down on the ground with a bullet in my leg! I got up and ran, and never saw the bastard who shot me. I hid in the brush until now. Heard you guys, thought maybe you could help me, but you were... occupied."

Behind him, Ghost growled louder, and Aiden nodded. The shooter could still be in the area, looking for Taylor. "Lots of hunters in these mountains. It's not deer season, but poachers are a problem up here. Come on, Taylor. Our car is parked on the shoulder of the road. We'll take you back to the ranch and get you fixed up."

"No! Don't you come near me!"

"For God's sake, Taylor, we only want to help you!"

Aiden felt Ghost shift behind him. "Kid, we're not going to hurt you. If I wanted to, I'd be picking your fucking ribs out of my teeth by now. Move it, before I change my mind and decide it would be easier to eat you!"

Taylor seemed to freeze, and Aiden heard a strangled scream, then a crunching thud as Taylor fainted. "Great, Ghost. That's just what we needed. Now we're going to have to lug his heavy ass back to the truck."

"Or -- just a thought -- we could leave him here and get on with our lives."

"Ghost! We can't leave him here! He's bleeding heavily -- I can smell it."

"I can, too, but its inviting trouble, Aiden."

"We have to help him, Ghost!"

"Then we can drive him into town. Not to the ranch."

"No, the ranch is much closer. Plus, we don't want him blabbing about us in town if we can help it." Aiden glared at Ghost, refusing to back down.

"Aiden..."

"He's hurt! He can die out here if we leave him!"

Ghost grunted, but then his cheek hitched in a wry smile. "Still think you're *anything* like Cain? He would've eaten the kid and been done with him, without thinking twice."

Aiden looked away, embarrassed, but reassured. Ghost was right -- for now. "Come on, help me. We have to move fast -- he won't be out for long, and besides, you're burning again."

It was immediately clear to Aiden that he'd been correct in his assumption. Taylor *had* been on his own for some time -- and was decidedly worse for the experience. His clothing was torn and stained, and he smelled like an old jock strap. His hair was long and greasy; his fingernails and knuckles were black with grime, and Aiden could feel his bones sticking up through his skin under his dirty clothes.

The right thigh of Taylor's jeans was stained dark with blood. A quick look proved that the bullet had entered the meaty part of his thigh -- the wound was deep, seeping blood, and full of dirt. Aiden had no doubt Taylor's immune system was compromised by his exposure to the elements and poor diet. His skin felt hot to the touch -- he probably had an infection to boot. He needed help, and quickly.

Between the two of them, they lifted Taylor's body from the ground and carried him through the brush to their truck, stuffing him as gently as they could onto the back seat.

Supplies would have to wait for another day. Aiden slipped behind the wheel with Ghost riding shotgun, and turned the truck around, heading back up the road to the ranch.

"Um, Ghost?"

"Yeah, Aiden?"

"Exactly how are we going to explain bringing a human to the ranch? Jax is going to go ballistic when he sees him."

"I have no idea, but you know what? I'm sort of looking forward to it."

Aiden glanced at Ghost and saw a smile tilting his lips. *Alphas*, Aiden thought, rolling his eyes. *They're all alike.*

Chapter Nine

Tai cringed as the voices in the parlor grew louder and angrier. Uncle Jax was howling mad, swearing and yelling. Uncle Ghost was screaming back at him, and Uncle Aiden's voice sounded more like an eagle's screech with every passing moment. Over them all, Uncle Dakota bellowed for everyone else to calm down.

She wished Mal was here to talk to about it -- she hated when her family argued -- but he was out brooding as he did so often these days. Ever since he'd decided to stay on the ranch for the winter, he seemed moodier, and more distant than ever. He'd taken off early that morning, and she hadn't seen him since. He probably wouldn't come back until after everyone else was asleep; maybe not until the following morning. It certainly wouldn't be the first time he stayed out all night.

They were all so caught up in throwing insults and blame at each other that none of them noticed her slip down the hall past them, to the room where Uncle Aiden and Uncle Ghost had brought the stranger. She closed the door behind her, cutting off the worse of the noise.

The stranger lay on his back on the cot in the room the ranch used as an infirmary. He was filthy, dressed in torn, dirty clothes, and he stank, but Tai could sense his pain. It was what had drawn her to him, despite the battle being waged in the parlor. *Poor thing, she thought. He's hurting, but no one's helping him -- they're too busy arguing. How could they leave him like this? Yes, he's human, but so what? Just because we're shifters doesn't give us the right to be inhumane. They can't let him lie here and bleed to death, can they?*

She peered closely at him, curious. She'd met humans before, but only on trips into town. Her uncles and parents kept her near, and discouraged her from having too close contact with any of the locals.

He looked like any of the other guys she knew at the ranch. His hair was dark brown, and he had whiskers growing in sparse, scratchy patches on his cheeks. He looked too skinny, though, as if he hadn't been eating regularly. His face was gaunt, and his collarbone protruded sharply against his skin.

Suddenly, his eyes fluttered open and he moaned. His eyes were brown, flecked with green and gold. Very pretty, she thought. They fixed on her face, and widened.

"Oh, shit!" he groaned, closing his eyes again. "I'm dead. The tiger fucking ate me, didn't he?"

Tai bit back a laugh. "What makes you think that?"

One eye cracked open. "You're an angel, aren't you? That means I'm dead. It could be worse, I guess. You could have horns and a pitchfork. Hell, I'm almost surprised that you

don't. Where are your wings? I thought all angels had wings and halos. Should my leg still be hurting? I'd have thought that would stop once I was dead."

This time Tai did laugh. "I'm not an angel, and you're not dead. My Uncle Ghost and Uncle Aiden brought you here because you were shot. I'm Tai."

"You've got one fucked up uncle, Tai. Did you know he can change into a tiger? I know it sounds crazy, but I saw it with my own eyes. He's a big, white hairy tiger, with black stripes and really wicked teeth."

Tai sniffed, feeling offended, even though a human couldn't be expected to understand. "He's not fucked up. Yes, I know he changes into a tiger, but everyone here shifts into something. I'm a horse, myself. So's my twin brother, Mal."

"Yeah, right, and I'm an aardvark."

"Really? Cool. We've been having an ant problem in the downstairs bathroom. As soon as we patch that hole in your hide, you can go have supper. It'll be a win-win situation," she said sarcastically.

"Great. It's just my luck to be rescued by an entire gang of psycho-freaks."

Tai scowled at him. Who did he think he was, calling them names like that? Hurt or not, she wasn't about to let him insult her family! "We're not freaks, and we're not crazy! Do you know how lucky you are that my uncles found you? You'd probably be dead by now if they hadn't brought you here. It gets cold in the mountains at night, and you're still bleeding. Stop insulting them, or I *will* let them eat you."

"Look, I'm sorry, okay? I've had a shitty couple of days. First, I'm shot, and then I see two gay guys playing hide-the-tree-stump right in front of me. As if that wasn't enough to make my eyes bleed, one of them changes into a fucking tiger! I pass out, and I wake up in a strange room with a beautiful girl who tells me she's a horse. I don't know what's real or not anymore!"

Tai's lips curved into a smile despite her anger, and she glanced away, feeling her cheeks heat. "You think I'm beautiful?"

"You're missing the point here, but yeah. I guess so."

Tai bit her lip, looking back at him. He was kind of cute, too, under all the filth and grime. "Look, I'm going to fix you, okay? Promise me you won't get all freaked out."

"Why would I freak? I mean, aside from the fact that you and your entire family are from the Island of Dr. Moreau?"

"You'll see," she said, smiling, choosing to take the high road and ignore his last jibe. She knelt down next to the cot, and found the hole in his jeans made by the bullet. Gripping the material, she ripped it open wider, exposing his thigh. He yelped, but she ignored him, concentrating on his wound.

A small hole pierced his skin, blackened on the edges by the heat of the bullet. It was still seeping blood fairly heavily, and dirt was ground into it, making infection likely. His skin was red, felt hot, and his eyes looked a little too bright, as if fevered. She wished Mal were here to tell her whether the bullet had done any critical damage inside the man's leg. Without Mal, she was flying blind. Still, she had to try.

Closing her eyes, she placed her hand over the wound, and felt the familiar warmth running through her veins, heating her palm.

Unlike the other shifters at the ranch, she and her brother had additional powers unlike anything anyone had ever seen before. They were both telekinetic, able to move objects merely by thinking about it.

Mal could diagnose injuries by touch, sometimes just by sight, although he was powerless to fix the problem.

It was Tai who was the healer, and it was that power that she drew upon, a surge of energy that sprung from somewhere deep inside her. She couldn't explain how it worked - and really didn't care. All that mattered was that it did. She concentrated, and felt a small, hard lump drawn from inside his leg shoot to the surface. When she lifted her hand, a bloody, misshapen bit of lead lay in her palm, and she tossed it aside. Laying her hand on Taylor's wound again, she let her power flow into him. A few moments later Tai again removed her hand. The wound had closed, fused to a shiny pink. In a few days, it would fade to a barely visible scar. She knew it would continue to heal and disappear completely in time.

"Whoa," he breathed, and when Tai glanced at him, his eyes were wide.

"*Whoa?* Is that supposed to be a horse joke?" she asked, arching an eyebrow at him, only half-joking.

"Huh? No! I'm just... I mean... Jesus, how did you *do* that?"

"It's just another manifestation of my psycho-freaky nature." She knew she was being sarcastic, but she couldn't help it. His earlier taunt still stung, even though he had called her beautiful afterward, and she hadn't forgotten the Island of Dr. Moreau crack, even though she hadn't commented on it.

"I said I was sorry. Come on, cut me a break, okay? You have to admit, all this seems kind of crazy. People who can change into animals only exist in horror movies... or at least, I thought so up until a couple of hours ago."

Tai considered it, noticed the earnest look in his eyes, and nodded. "I suppose so. It's perfectly natural to me. I grew up here, and shifters are the only family I've ever known. We're nice people, once you get to know us."

"Yeah, well... you did help me. Thanks."

"You're welcome. What's your name, by the way?"

"Taylor. Taylor Ames."

"Nice to meet you, Taylor Ames," Tai said with a smile. "No offense, but I'm thinking you could do with a shower. You reek."

"Gee, why would I take offense at that?" Taylor's cheek hitched in a boyish grin, but his eyes darkened with something else entirely as they drifted from Tai's face to other parts of her anatomy. "You know, I *was* shot. I might need a little help in the shower. You know... in case I pass out from the pain, and all."

He's more than cute, Tai realized. *Filthy or not, he's really handsome*. Her heart fluttered and there was a sudden dampness between her legs as her mare neighed and took notice of Taylor's lean, hard body. She jumped to her feet, embarrassed by her body's reaction to a complete stranger -- and a human one, at that. *Handsome and definitely dangerous*, she thought.

"I-It was only a scratch, and I fixed it. Don't be such a big baby. I'll get you a towel. The bathroom's down the hall," she said, edging backward toward the door. The smile on his face grew wider; he knew he was making her nervous. "Stop doing that!"

"Doing what?"

"Looking at me like that!"

"Like how?"

"Like... like you're a lion, and I'm a plate of prime rib."

"I can't help it. You *are* prime." He wiggled his eyebrows, rolled to his side, and leaned up on one elbow.

His movement drew Tai's gaze to his crotch, where a lump had risen, distending the front of his jeans. Her cheeks burned, but she narrowed her eyes at him. "Knock that off!"

His eyes sparkled; he knew exactly what she was talking about, and wasn't embarrassed at all. "I can't. It's attached to the rest of me."

"Very funny! How hard up would a girl have to be to jump in the sack with you? You look and smell like a compost heap."

"Flattery will get you everywhere."

Tai opened her mouth to retort, but suddenly the door banged in, slamming into her back. All she managed was a startled "Oof!"

Jax didn't enter the room -- he *exploded* into it, snarling and showing his teeth.

"What the hell is going on in here? Tai? What are you doing in here... with *him*? What did he do to you? Did he touch you? I'll fucking rip him a new--"

"Uncle Jax! Stop it! He didn't do anything but bleed," Tai huffed. Honestly, when were her uncles going to stop treating her like a child? She was an adult and could take care of herself. Her previous bout of embarrassment forgotten, she folded her arms across her chest and glared at Jax. "I healed him. He was going to go take a shower."

"You *healed* him? Are you crazy? He's human, Tai!"

"No kidding. I figured that out all by myself, Uncle Jax. What were *you* going to do with him? Let him bleed out, and bury him in the yard?"

"He wasn't bleeding so badly. He would have been okay," Jax argued. His bright green eyes trained on Taylor, and if looks could kill, Taylor would have been yesterday's pot roast.

"He still had the bullet inside him, and the wound was as dirty as the rest of him. It would have become infected!"

"That's why God invented penicillin. How many times have we told you that we can't trust humans, Tai?"

Luckily for all of them, Dakota followed Jax into the room. "Jax, what's done is done. Let the boy get cleaned up, and we can sit down and talk this out."

"Talk it out? He's *human*!" Jax growled, as if they hadn't already covered that fact.

"You know, maybe Mal was right!" Tai cried. "Maybe it *is* time for us to leave! You may not like it, Uncle Jax, but the world is *full* of humans. There are a lot more of them than there are of us! Maybe it's time to start learning to coexist, instead of hiding up here!"

Jax and Tai squared off, each glaring at the other.

"Enough!" Dakota roared, standing between them. "We aren't animals. We're not going to tear each other's throats out over this. Tai, your uncle is only trying to protect you. Jax,

Tai is who she is -- she's never been able to sit by and watch someone suffer, and you know it. Now, everybody take a breath and calm down."

Taylor cleared his throat. "Um, excuse me. I--"

"Son, you'll never know how much is riding on you keeping your mouth shut right now," Dakota said. "Get up, and go down the hall, first door on your right. Towels are in the linen closet next to the bathroom."

Taylor was smarter than Tai might have given him credit for being, since he closed his mouth with an audible *pop*, jumped off the bed and made a beeline for the bathroom. She noticed a little smugly that he wasn't limping at all. She also noticed how fine his rear end looked in his ripped jeans, and felt her cheeks heat with more than anger.

"Tai, I think it would be best if you went up to your room. I need to talk to Uncle Jax," Dakota continued, once Taylor was safely out of reach.

"Uncle Jax, I'm sorry," Tai said. Truly, she hated arguing with her family. She knew they only wanted the best for her, and she loved them all, even when they made her angry. She wrapped her arms around Jax's neck, hugging him tightly.

"I know, baby. Me, too. I just don't know what we're going to do with him now, that's all." He kissed the top of her head, and she knew everything was forgiven.

"We'll figure it out. Come on, Jax. He looks about your size. Let's go dig up some duds for him," Dakota said. He smiled at Tai, and bent to kiss her cheek.

"Are you kidding? I don't want him inside my territory, never mind inside my clothes!" Jax grumbled as he followed Dakota out of the room.

Tai laughed, listening to them bicker all the way into their bedroom. She paused on her way to the stairs, glancing at the bathroom, from which she could hear the splatter of water against tile. She didn't know who Taylor Ames was or where he'd come from, but she knew one thing -- he was going to stay, at least for a while. She didn't know why that made her happy, but it did, and she was smiling as she headed up the stairs toward her bedroom.

Chapter Ten

They'd taken Interstate 75 North, through Georgia, to I-24 West. From there, they drove through Tennessee and Kentucky, entering Illinois, and Gar was getting angrier and more frustrated with every passing mile.

He never stopped nagging at them, but nothing he said got through their thick skulls. If he let them reach the ranch, they'd try to attack. They couldn't hope to succeed, and all the years Gar had spent training them and plotting his revenge and takeover of the ranch would have been for nothing.

"This is not going to work. What do you think you're going to do? Walk in through the front gates and start eating everyone in sight? They have weapons up there. Guns! Traps! They took your father down and he was three times your size! You need a fucking plan!"

"Shut up, Gar! Are you a cheetah or a fucking cockroach? We're tired of hiding, of living in a goddamn shanty in the middle of nowhere. We want what should've belonged to us in the first place. Either you're with us, or you're fucking lunch. What's it going to be?" Nex snarled at him.

Gar backed off. He was no match for the two of them together, and he knew it.

It was Nex who was the real problem. He was out of control. Gar couldn't manage him anymore. He was too much like his father, blinded by his own power. Caedes was always the more malleable of the two; he would listen to Gar if Nex were out of the picture. By the time they got to Nebraska, with Wyoming in spitting distance, Gar made his decision.

Nex had to go. Gar was sure he could convince Caedes to return to Florida once his brother was dead. Gar would send out feelers, gather predator shifters to them, and put the Ultimate Predator gang back together. Then, after they had strength in numbers again, they would stage an attack on the ranch. *Yeah, then everything will be back on track. I'll have it all*, he thought.

They took a side trip into Scott's Bluff, Nebraska. Maybe it was being on the road for so long, cooped up in the car, or perhaps Gar was getting on both of their last nerves, but Nex and Caedes were fidgeting and bickering as the need to hunt grew stronger and more insistent with every passing mile.

For his part, Gar was getting more and more panicky the closer they got to Wyoming. If he didn't get to Nex soon, it would be too late, but the ranch was far too close to allow Gar the luxury of continuing to wait for the perfect opportunity to take Nex out.

They followed road signs to the Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area, where they parked the car and followed one of the hiking trails. The three men hiked for a couple of miles before veering from the trail into the woods. *This is it*, Gar thought. *If I'm going to take Nex down, it's going to have to be now. I'm out of time.*

His plan was simple. He'd wait until he could separate Nex from Caedes, kill Nex, and blame it on a local predator -- a bear, perhaps. Caedes would believe him. He'd be too distraught to notice there was no other trace of another predator, and he would never believe that Gar would murder Nex. Gar was the closest thing to a father either of them had ever known, and Caedes trusted him.

As far as the actual deed went, Gar was confident he could take Nex. After all, Gar had years of experience on his side; Nex was still very young. Gar couldn't hope to stand against both of the twins together, but one alone, especially with the element of surprise? *Easy*, he thought. *One jump, one bite, and it'll be over. Nex won't know what hit him.*

Gar gave no indication of his thoughts as he watched Nex and Caedes strip and shift, but as soon as they stalked into the brush, already having scented prey, he quickly shed his clothing and shifted into his cheetah.

With the utmost care, keeping downwind, he stalked the hunters. His paws made no sound as he glided through the underbrush, belly close to the ground. His keen nose followed their trail easily, and he scented the deer at the same time. He paused when he heard the sound of their attack.

Gar leapt into a tree near where the two raptors were noisily dispatching the deer. Hunkered down on a long, stout branch, his tail swishing nervously, he waited and watched. He was in luck. The doe was small, a yearling, and hardly enough to fill the bellies of two hungry raptors.

He had no doubt Nex would want the lion's share, and force Caedes to hunt again. A moment later, Nex proved him right, stopping Caedes from taking a bite by viciously snapping his bear-trap jaws at his twin.

Caedes reluctantly left in search of his own lunch. Nex remained behind, nose-deep in the steaming entrails of the doe.

Every nerve in Gar's body was on high alert, his body tensed, and excitement rippled his flanks. As soon as he heard Caedes bringing down another deer in the distance, he leapt.

He landed on Nex' back, claws digging in deep. He stretched his jaws open wide, intending to snap them closed over Nex's neck, to crush his vertebrae or separate it from his skull.

Nex screamed, bucking with such power and fury that Gar had trouble holding on. Nex's head twisted, his jaws snapping perilously close to Gar's face. He heard Caedes' answering roar and panicked. If Caedes reached them before he could kill Nex, it was all over. They'd rip him to pieces. His only chance had been to take Nex down quickly, and he'd blown it.

Terrified, he lost his grip and slipped off Nex' back. Suddenly, moving faster than even Gar would have thought possible, Nex spun around and slashed at Gar with the razor-sharp, six-inch, retractable claw on his right hind foot. Gar was quick, but not quick enough. It opened a long, deep wound along Gar's flank.

Gar howled in pain, stumbling and trying to get away. The scent of his own blood filled his nostrils, his vision blurring with pain. His mind worked rapidly even through the red haze of agony, seeking a way out. His only hope was to somehow gain the pity of Caedes. He heard a crashing sound coming from the brush just a moment before Caedes burst through the bushes, and quickly shifted back into his human form. Covered with blood, Gar moaned piteously.

Nex roared, jaws snapping at the air. He looked ready to tear Gar apart, but just as Gar hoped, Caedes shifted and stepped between them.

"What the fuck happened, Nex?" Caedes asked. Nex continued to snarl and snap his jaws in Gar's direction, the claws on his feet clicking ominously on the pebble-strewn ground. He leaned forward, stretched his neck out and roared. The sound sent an icy shiver racing down Gar's spine, loosening his bladder.

Then Nex shifted as well. "The fucking bastard tried to kill me!"

"No!" Gar cried, although his voice sounded weak and whiny, even to his own ears. "No, that's not true! I would never try to hurt you!"

"You jumped me, asshole!" Nex took a step in Gar's direction, his pupils elongating, a sign that he was close to shifting again. Gar saw his own death in their gleaming depths.

"I was aiming for the deer! I'm older now, my eyesight isn't what it used to be," he said feebly. "I have needs too, you know! I smelled your kill and figured you wouldn't mind sharing. I never meant to land on you!"

"Liar!" Nex roared. His voice deepened and rasped; the raptor inside him glared at Gar from just beneath Nex' skin. Gar knew if Nex shifted again, Gar's next breath would be his last.

"Please, Caedes, talk to him! Tell him I'd never try to hurt either one of you!" Gar screamed, his voice tripping up several octaves in his terror. His hands were cupped over his side, where the deep wound bled copiously. Every breath was torture, but it was still better than the alternative. "I raised you! Took care of you! Tell him!"

Caedes stared hard at Gar, and glanced over the wounds on Nex' back caused by Gar's cheetah's claws. "I should let him kill you. Something tells me you've done nothing but lie to us all of our lives."

"No!" Gar cried, gasping for air. He moaned, slumping into the dirt.

"Come on, Nex. Let's go. He'll never survive the night, not bleeding like that. A cougar or a bear will smell him and finish him off."

"Why don't we just kill him?" Nex growled. "Finish it? He tried to kill me, Caed!"

He looked highly agitated, dancing from foot to the other, bloodlust clearly singing in his veins. Gar wasn't sure Caedes could convince him to back off, and moaned, unnoticed by the two.

"Because like it or not, if it wasn't for him, we wouldn't have survived this long. Our mother died when we were born; nobody else would have taken us in. You know it's true, Nex. He kept us safe growing up, taught us to control the shifting, to hunt. He's a bastard, and I don't trust him anymore, but we owe him that much."

"Bullshit! He's nothing to us! He needs to pay for what he did to me!"

"He *is* paying. Kill him and you put him out of his misery," Caedes said.

Nex didn't look pleased, but he finally nodded. He spat at Gar. "I hope you fucking hold on for a week. I hope you're still alive when whatever comes along starts eating you, cocksucker."

They turned away, heading back in the direction they'd come, leaving Gar behind without a backward glance.

Time ticked by, each moment vivid with agony as Gar waited for Nex and Caedes' footsteps and scent to fade. Blood poured from his gash, coloring the ground crimson. His eyes, which had been overflowing with tears, and cloudy with pain, cleared. His lip curled in a snarl. *Stupid hatchlings. Didn't I teach you better than that? You should have killed me while you had the chance. I'm still alive, and I'm going to get out of here. When I do, I'm coming after you both, and next time, I won't lose*, he thought, then slowly, painfully, struggled to his feet and began to drag himself deeper into the brush. He needed to find a place to hide; somewhere he could hole up and lick his wounds.

Perhaps his senses were dulled by the smell of his own blood or the pain, but he never smelled the big cat, or heard the mountain lion's snarl as it leaped. He was brought to the ground by a heavy weight hitting him full force on the back. It knocked the wind out of him, the resulting wave of pain so intense he could barely manage to roll over. He was too weak to fight; and he stared up unbelieving into unblinking, cold, feral green eyes, and a yawning mouth lined with sharp teeth. It was then, in the very last moments of his life, Gar realized how wrong he'd been. The twins weren't the stupid ones after all.

Caedes drove, but his mind was a million miles away from the blacktop highway. They'd just crossed over into Wyoming, nearing Cheyenne. According to what Gar had told them, they needed to head toward Jackson Hole, in the northwestern corner of the state. The Shifting Sands Ranch was near there, up in the Grand Teton Mountains.

No matter what he said to the contrary, and no matter that he'd sided with Nex against Gar, he wasn't sure they were doing the right thing. Not for the reasons Gar had given -- he knew that together, he and Nex were both powerful and formidable -- but because he had begun to have doubts about the shifters at the ranch.

Over the years, Gar had told Caedes and Nex about their father, about raids on the Ultimate Predators by the shifters from the Shifting Sands. At first, Caedes believed, just as Nex did, that the ranch's shifters were their mortal enemies. He took as gospel Gar's claim that Cain had finally sought to settle the differences between the two Packs, and was murdered for his trouble. As Caedes matured, particularly as he'd grown physically and needed to hunt larger animals to feed, something in Gar's story began to ring false.

Cain was a T-Rex shifter. *A fucking Tyrannosaurus Rex*, Caedes thought as he drove, his mind only partly on the road. Fifteen feet high, thirty feet long, with several tons of muscle and teeth between head and tail, Cain's very step would have shook the earth.

The leaders of the Shifting Sands were a bear and a wolf. How could a pack of mammals, no matter how ferocious, launch an attack on Cain's home territory and succeed? The spongy, mosquito-infested swamp didn't provide much in the way of stable footing for anyone unused to it. A bunch of mammals armed with bazookas and automatic weapons, marching into the Everglades to start a war seemed ridiculously implausible.

Even if they had, why would Cain trek a couple of thousand miles north to "settle the matter?" More importantly, how had Gar, a pitiful mammal himself, survived when Cain had not?

In the nearly twenty years since the war, why hadn't a single shifter from the ranch returned to the Everglades? If they hated the Ultimate Predators as much as Gar claimed, why hadn't they returned to finish wiping the Pack out?

No, it just didn't make sense. There were too many questions, too many holes in Gar's story.

Gar was lying. Caedes became even more convinced of it after Gar's attack on Nex. Why? What purpose had it served for Gar to lie to them all these years, to make them hate the shifters at the ranch? To encourage Caedes and Nex to seek revenge on them? Why would he suddenly want Nex dead?

The answer seemed obvious. *Power*, Caedes thought. *Gar wanted to be an alpha*. He wanted control of both himself and Nex, and of every living thing on that ranch, but wasn't ready to take the step yet. Why Gar wanted to wait was a mystery. Maybe he

wanted more muscle. Perhaps he was planning to look for more shifters, to form a pack of his own, or maybe he really did believe Caedes and Nex weren't ready.

Things had been tense between the three of them lately -- Nex was beginning to chomp at the bit, defying Gar, pushing Caedes to hunt more often. Caedes hadn't really wanted to go north. He would have been content to remain in the swamp, at least for a while, and somehow, Gar knew it. He must have thought he could control Caedes; that Caedes would be a good dog and heel, especially if Nex wasn't around to bully him.

Caedes' eyes cut toward Nex. It was obvious he was hurting; Gar's claws had sunk deep, but more than the physical discomfort, Caedes could sense rage roiling inside his gut. Nex was furious Gar had betrayed them, and a pissed off velociraptor was doubly dangerous. There was no telling what Nex would do when they reached the ranch, and that made Caedes nervous.

"What are you looking at?" Nex snarled. His eyes were still yellow, a sign that he was close to losing control over his raptor.

"Nothing."

"I shouldn't have listened to you. I should have fucking gutted the bastard."

"He'll never survive out there, Nex. Why bother yourself with killing him?"

"At least I would have had the satisfaction of tasting his blood, of seeing the fear in his eyes as he died." Nex' pupils elongated, his raptor looking out through Nex' eyes. "I'll tell you one thing, Caed. I'll never make that mistake again. From now on, anything or anyone who crosses me gets eaten."

Caedes blinked. Nex hadn't said it, but Caedes could read the threat clearly in his eyes. The anything or anyone Nex was talking about included Caedes himself.

He felt a cold chill, and turned his mind back to the road.

Chapter Eleven

Tai seemed to be spending all of her time trying to ignore Taylor, and doing a bad job of it.

She'd been endeavoring to put him out of her mind for the past week and a half, ever since he'd arrived at the ranch and she'd healed him, but it was getting more and more difficult with each passing hour.

He wasn't making it easy for her, either.

After his shower, she'd caught a glimpse of him walking back into the infirmary. His long, dark hair was wet; the water staining the collar of the T-shirt Uncle Jax had lent him. The jeans he wore were a little too tight, clinging to the curve of his firm rump. He had long legs, and his bare feet were tanned. He was sex on feet, she decided, as handsome as any of the models in the fashion magazines she often bought in town. The look in his eyes when he'd stared at her after she healed him was seared into her memory, as was the reaction of her body.

Since then, she could barely take her eyes off him. It would begin in the morning, when she'd find him in the kitchen, head bent over his breakfast, shoveling it in.

Taylor rarely spoke to her, usually never even looked in her direction if it could be helped, but she knew he was aware of her presence. A muscle would tighten in his jaw as if he was clenching his teeth, and he often developed a small tic under his eye. His fingers would tighten around his fork or spoon until his knuckles turned white, and he'd hurry eating, nearly choking as if he were trying to swallow with as little time spent chewing as possible. As soon as his plate was clean, he'd bolt out of the door, off to do chores.

She'd gotten the distinct impression it wasn't the work waiting for him that lit a fire under that fine rear end of his -- it was her, and his need to put distance between them.

Sometimes Tai would see him pitching hay in the barn loft, shirtless, his muscles moving fluidly under his skin. The good food at the ranch was already putting some meat on his bones -- he seemed to get more muscular and sexier every time she saw him.

Lunch would find him back at the kitchen table. Tai wondered why he was allowed to continue taking his meals in the main house, rather than in the dining hall with the rest of the ranch hands. He was probably there only because Uncle Dakota worried the other shifters might be uncomfortable around him, she thought. It must've been Dakota, because Tai knew Jax would have preferred Taylor to be *in* the stew pot, rather than eating from it. Jax would have been thrilled if one of the predator-shifters mistook Taylor for a midday snack.

After lunch was more of the same. Tai would spend the afternoon sneaking around, hiding in shadows, watching Taylor work chopping wood or feeding and watering the livestock. He never ate dinner with her and her family, although he had a standing invitation from Dakota. Taylor always waited until after they were finished before raiding the refrigerator for leftovers.

Through it all, he kept his distance from her.

She knew why Taylor never spoke to her, and why he preferred to keep as much distance between them as possible. He'd gotten the message loud and clear from Uncle Jax the night Taylor had arrived. Tai had crept to the edge of stairway, heart pounding, crouching in the dark like a naughty child, listening to the conversation that had continued after he'd finished showering.

"We've decided you can stay," Jax said. His voice was hard and tight, sounding as if every word was being pulled from his throat with a pair of pliers. It was clear he wasn't pleased to be making the offer. Tai assumed Uncle Dakota had a lot to do with Jax changing his mind. "You'll get room and board, and a paycheck. In return, you'll work hard doing whatever needs to be done around here, and most importantly, you'll stay the fuck away from my niece."

That last bit had set Tai's teeth on edge.

Sometimes she wondered if Mal wasn't right after all when he said it was time to fly from the nest, to live their lives on their own. She loved her family dearly, but they always insisted on treating her like a shiny, delicate glass bauble. Tai didn't need to be protected, or hidden away like a treasure. She was alive; a living, breathing woman with needs and hopes and dreams of her own, perfectly capable of making her own decisions, and more than adequately able to protect herself. When were they going to see that?

What upset her even more was the fact that Mal seemed to hate Taylor on sight. He agreed wholeheartedly with Uncle Jax, and constantly warned Tai to stay away from Taylor. Their last conversation was just before Mal left with the fence crew. He'd be gone a couple of weeks -- the ranch was huge, with miles of fence to keep in order -- and seemed to want to squeeze in all the lectures in he could in the time he had left.

"He's bad news, Tai. First of all, he's human. He can't possibly understand us," Mal said, sitting down on the edge of her bed that night. His eyes were hard and narrowed. "We don't know anything about him, where he came from... I don't trust him. Uncle Jax should've made him leave."

"How can you say that, Mal? You don't know him. He's a good person. He's just... lost, that's all," Tai retorted.

"I don't need to know him. I can see right through him. I saw the way he looked at you, Tai. He only wants one thing, and after he gets it, he'll be gone. He's a threat to everyone

here, too, not just to you. Do you think he'd keep his mouth shut after he leaves? He'll tell everyone about us!"

"Mal!" Tai sprang up from the bed, fists clenched into balls at her sides. "That's ridiculous! You make him sound like a serial rapist!"

"Who's to say he's not? We don't know anything about him, Tai!"

They'd ended the fight with Mal storming out of her bedroom. It was the first time Tai could remember going to bed while angry at Mal, and it hurt her deeply that he was being so... so... *medieval* about everything. He'd practically threatened to put her in a chastity belt!

She was tempted to cozy up to Taylor just to spite everyone else, but she also knew Taylor was alone, needed a job, and a place to stay. She didn't want to be the one to get him tossed out on his ear. However, despite all her good intentions, she just couldn't stop watching him. The fact that he was very easy on the eyes, and made her stomach do strange flip-flops whenever he looked at her, didn't help, either.

He didn't look at her nearly as often as Tai would have liked. It seemed Taylor had taken Jax's warning to heart. He ignored Tai, rarely glanced her way, and never spoke to her unless absolutely necessary. When he did, it was with as few words as possible.

Still, there'd been a few times when she'd caught him watching her when he thought she hadn't noticed, and no one else was around. Once, their eyes had met and Tai swore she could feel an electric jolt sizzle in the air between them. She'd felt it right down to her toes, and it left her wet and aching. Afterward, she'd run up to her bedroom and locked herself in, afraid of what it meant.

Nothing, she told herself. *It was your imagination, nothing more.* She nearly convinced herself of it, but couldn't keep from peeking at him, from following him around, hoping he'd look her way again.

She chided herself, all the while knowing she wouldn't listen. *You're turning into a stalker! Why don't you just throw yourself at him, and beg him to take your virginity while you're at it! You're behaving like a child, and making a fool out of yourself to boot!*

She still couldn't seem to stop herself from often "coincidentally" being in the same place as he was, or watching him whenever possible. As time went on, the fact that he studiously ignored her encouraged her to grow bolder. She followed him in plain sight, plopped herself down in a chair at the table as he ate, found excuses to work nearby as he did his chores. If asked, she might have admitted that being ignored was grating on her nerves and ego. Tai was beginning to think Taylor didn't care, or wasn't interested in her anymore, and that made her a little angry.

Then, one day, nearly two weeks after Taylor had come to live at the ranch, he turned the tables on her, and nearly scared her out of her bloomers.

He was in the barn loft, bare-chested, pitching hay, wearing only a pair of jeans and his boots. Tai climbed the rickety ladder to the loft, ostensibly to collect a few of the canning jars kept in boxes up there. She could have gotten jars from the supply shed, but that would have defeated her purpose. Tai didn't need the jars at all -- it was just an excuse to get close to Taylor again.

She sifted through a couple of old boxes on the shelves set into the far wall of the loft, picking a few of the dusty jars at random to take back with her. When she turned around, she found herself face-to-face with Taylor. Only inches separated them, and she swore she could feel the heat of his bare skin against hers, straight through her T-shirt. She was so surprised, she nearly dropped the jars. They clinked musically as she juggled them in her hands.

"Why do you keep doing this, Tai?" he asked. His voice was rich and velvety, and sounded deeper in tone than it had before. He couldn't quite match Uncle Dakota's baritone, but he was getting close. It sent a shiver tickling across her skin. "Why did you follow me up here?"

It took her a moment to find her own voice. It was the first time he'd spoken more than a couple of words at a time to her, and never from so close. She could smell the mint of mouthwash on his warm breath. "Because we needed canning jars," she said weakly, holding up one of the glass jars.

"No, you didn't. You could've gotten those from the supply shed. You've been following me since I got here, all day, every day. Every time I turn around, I see you nearby. Why?" His brown eyes, flecked with gold, sparkled, although Tai couldn't decide if it was with anger, or something else, something... needful. Her stomach fluttered, and her legs suddenly felt weak.

She refused to let him see how badly he'd rattled her, and instantly when on the defensive. "Are you always so full of yourself? It's just a coincidence. I've got better things to do with my time than follow you." She managed to turn her nose up at him, even as her knees knocked together.

"Oh, yeah, sure you do. I go out to feed the hogs, and there you are, picking wildflowers along the fence next to the pen. I need to chop wood, and you -- coincidentally -- need to wash the windows of the shed next to the woodpile. I have to whitewash the chicken coop, and you need to collect the eggs. I need to--"

"You're crazy. You're imagining things!" Tai huffed. Everything he said was true, and while she'd thought she was being discreet at the time, she'd evidently exhibited all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

He sighed and rolled his beautiful brown eyes at her. "I guess it's just coincidence that I need to repair the clothesline out back at the exact same time you need to weed the garden next to the back porch, huh? I'm told to fix the loose board on the front porch, and -- surprise! -- you pick that very same moment to sit on the porch rocker and read."

"It's a free country, isn't it?"

"Why are you doing this Tai?" Taylor asked again. This time when he asked the question, his voice was softer, and she heard a distinct ache in it. "You know your uncles don't like me--"

"That's not true. Uncle Dakota likes you."

"Dakota *tolerates* me -- there's a difference. Jax hates me, and so does your brother."

"That's not true... entirely. They don't hate you -- they just don't know you yet, Taylor."

"You still haven't answered my question, Tai. Why are you doing this? Why follow me around when you know it's only going to cause trouble?" He stretched his arms out, bracing his hands against the shelves and trapping her. "Don't you know that you've been driving me crazy? That I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since I got here? I've been trying. Really, really trying, but it's not working, and you showing up everywhere I go is making it freaking impossible!"

Tai felt her cheeks heat and her lips curl in a smile. She looked down at her sneakers, scuffing the toes against the hay-strewn floor. "You think about me?" she asked, feeling timid, and shy, and relieved at the same time.

"Yes, I do -- all the God damn time! I can't get you out of my head," Taylor murmured. His fingers curled under her chin and tipped her face up toward his. "I think about you every minute I'm awake, and then when I sleep, you're in my dreams."

"Oh," Tai said softly. Her eyes drifted closed and her lips parted, waiting for what she hoped was coming. *Kiss me, Taylor*, she thought fervently. *Kiss me now, please!* She held still, holding her breath, waiting.

One heartbeat passed, then another, then enough to make her feel uncomfortable. Something was wrong. How long was it going to take him to close the few inches that had separated their lips?

She opened her eyes just in time to see Taylor's dark head disappearing over the edge of the loft as he descended the ladder.

Oh, hell no! She thought, moving quickly. She stepped over the side of the loft and scampered down the ladder, running full tilt until she passed Taylor and cut off his retreat

from the barn. "Hold it right there! How dare you leave me up there like that? You were playing with me, weren't you? You think it's funny!"

"No! Believe me, this isn't a game. Tai, do you have any idea how close I was to losing control just now? What I wanted to do to you up there? What's worse is that you would have let me -- you *wanted* me to kiss you. Tai, your uncles would skin us both alive! You have to leave me alone. You have to! I can't take any more of this, damn it!" Taylor yelled, shoving his fingers through his hair.

"Are you such a coward that you'd give up on me because you're afraid of my uncles?" Tai shot back, glaring up at him.

"I'm not afraid! Not for me, anyway. It's *you* I'm worried about! They're your family, Tai, and you don't know how lucky you are to have them. I care about you too much to make you choose between them and me."

Tai gasped, feeling her anger drain away. She blinked back sudden tears as his words registered in her heart. She reached up and brushed her fingertips along his cheek, feeling whiskers bristle against her skin. "You care about me? Really?"

"Of course I do! Why do you think it's so hard for me to stay away from you? I should've just left that first night, but I couldn't. I've never met anyone like you -- I wanted to get to know you better. Then, after a little while, I couldn't bring myself to leave you behind. I told myself it was better to be near you even if I couldn't have you, than never see you again. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I should just leave."

"No!" Tai said vehemently, shaking her head. She reached up with her other arm, trapping his face between her hands. "Listen to me, Taylor. I care about you, too. I *have* been following you, but not because I wanted to test you, or get you into trouble. I couldn't stop myself! I needed to be near you, to see you."

"Oh, brother, this is some mess! What are we going to do, Tai?" he asked softly, covering her hands with his own. His hands felt warm and strong. "I don't want to leave."

"Well, for starters, this..." she said, lifting up on her toes. She pulled him toward her, slanting her mouth over his, and kissed him for all she was worth.

Something changed between them. She couldn't put a name to it, didn't know what it meant, but she felt the subtle shift in the very core of her being, and knew from the way Taylor's arms stiffened around her that he'd felt it, too.

Then she forgot about it as Taylor deepened their kiss, then pulled her toward the ladder and the soft, fragrant mounds of hay waiting in the loft.

Chapter Twelve

"Something's wrong," Jax said. He and Dakota were in their bedroom. Dakota had dragged Jax away from his work again, mumbling something about Jax working too hard, and needing a break. Jax knew from experience that was Dakota-speak for "I'm horny, and I want you upstairs and naked." Never being one to deny Dakota -- or himself -- a few minutes of rough-and-tumble fun under the covers, Jax had powered down his computer and allowed Dakota to lead him upstairs.

Something was wrong, though. Jax could feel it in his bones, a slight wariness, an edgy, insistent feeling that something was going on he didn't know about, and wouldn't like one bit if he did. He ignored Dakota for a moment, listening to the wolf's voice inside, and stalked to the window, pulling the curtain aside.

The yard looked as it should -- nothing out of the ordinary that he could see. People walked alone or in pairs here and there; he spotted Deidre and Oscar working in the vegetable garden with a few others; Aiden and Ghost were barely visible through the windows of the workshop, working in the relative coolness and shade.

You're just feeling anxious because of the human, he told himself. *You've been on edge ever since you told Dakota he could stay. The boy is like a dog in heat around Tai, but he'd never dare to...* Jax suddenly stiffened, spinning around to glare at Dakota. "Where's Tai?" he asked.

"I don't know," Dakota answered, pausing with his shirt half-unbuttoned, and the fly of his jeans flapping open. He wasn't wearing underwear.

Jax caught a glimpse of black hair in the gap of the zipper, and licked his lips. "I'm worried about her and Taylor. I don't trust that boy."

"Tai's a big girl, Jax. She can take care of herself. Taylor's a good kid -- you don't need to worry about him," Dakota said. He returned to unbuttoning his shirt, slipping it off his wide shoulders. His big hands skimmed over his chest and belly, dipping into the waistband of his jeans. "So... should I continue, or do you want to forget about it for now?"

Jax curled his lip, growling. He got a whiff of Dakota's scent, and felt his body harden in response. The expression on his face must have given Dakota his answer, because the bastard laughed and shimmied out of his jeans, as if he'd known what Jax would say.

Damn it if he wasn't right, too.

Lord, Jax could look at Dakota's body all day and all night and never get bored, even though he knew every dip and rise and sharp angle as well as, or better than, he knew his own. He had a mental map of every scar, every freckle, every hair, and yet it always managed to feel fresh and new whenever his fingertips and lips touched Dakota's skin.

Dakota was Jax's greatest gift, and worst temptation, never failing to support him when he was feeling low, or distract him when his responsibilities weighed too heavily on his shoulders. Jax knew it, felt in the deepest places in his heart, even if he didn't tell Dakota often enough.

"You are sin on legs, boy," Jax said, stripping out of his shirt, kicking off his boots, and peeling off his jeans. "Pure sex, ripe and hot and making me crazy."

Heat flared in Dakota's eyes, matching the fire brewing in Jax's lower belly. "You ain't too bad yourself. Come here and gimme some of that, Jax. Been almost two days since the last time, and that's about three days too long."

"I hear that," Jax chuckled, walking forward into Dakota's arms. His skin was warm against Jax's; he smelled of hard work and the honey-oatmeal soap he favored. Jax reached for his mouth, suddenly starving for a taste. How many kisses had they shared over the years? A million? Two? More? It didn't matter; Dakota's mouth was a soft, hot heaven, a playground for Jax's tongue, and he tasted as new and fresh as clear, bright spring water.

Dakota's hands, work-roughened and strong, cupped his cheeks as Jax ran his fingers over Dakota's chest and shoulders. He loved the soft sounds Dakota made while kissing him; he loved even more the stiff cocks burning between their bellies.

He nibbled at Dakota's bottom lip, then leisurely licked Dakota's jaw from chin to ear, sucking Dakota's earlobe into his mouth.

"Keep that up and this is going to be over near before it gets started," Dakota groaned.

Jax laughed evilly as his tongue traced the ridges and folds of Dakota's ear. "Is it now?"

"Not what I had in mind, Jax. Not at all."

"Oh? Wanna tell me what it was you were thinking?"

"Mmm... no, sir, but I'll show you."

Jax squealed as Dakota swiftly bent and scooped him up in a fireman's carry. "Hey! Put me down!"

"With pleasure," Dakota rumbled. Jax felt nothing but air for a moment, then the springy mattress of their bed met his backside. His eyes widened as Dakota's large form went airborne, seeming to hover for a heartbeat right above him.

Dakota's weight pressed him into the mattress, stirring a growl in Jax's chest. "Hey, get off me!"

"Nope. This is more in line with what I was thinking. You asked, after all." Dakota's laugh, rich and hearty, was completely without remorse. "Now, hold still while I ravish you."

"Oh, hell no!" Jax tried to sound stern, but failed as Dakota's long fingers found a ticklish spot on his ribs. "Knock it off!"

"Gonna let me love you?"

"Get off me!" Jax yelled as Dakota's fingers dug in, laughing and trying to roll out from under Dakota's considerable weight. "Dakota!"

"Say it. Say you want some bear-loving."

"Okay, okay! I give!" Jax cried, grinning and scowling all at the same time. "I want my big ol' bear to love me. Love me good, Dakota." His voice dropped to a hoarse, needy whisper. "Hard."

"It's always hard for you, baby," Dakota answered.

A vaguely smart assed remark floated through Jax's mind at the cliché, but it never had the opportunity to fully form. Dakota's teeth and lips began teasing the skin under his jaw with light nips, sending shivers of pleasure rippling through him, derailing his train of thought. By the time Dakota's mouth reached Jax's cock, he'd ceased thinking in words at all. All he could manage was to lie there and *feel*.

He felt everything in exquisite detail, desire awaking every nerve ending, his body growing hypersensitive. He felt Dakota's mouth, hot and wet, covering the head of his cock, Dakota's breath, warm, blowing across his shaft, and Dakota's tongue, velvety soft, licking at his balls. He felt Dakota's fingers tracing the thin strip of flesh between his sac and ass, and then delving between his cheeks. One digit, slick with spit, slipped inside his body, pushing, crooking, and hitting the spot that made him squirm and beg for more.

"Gonna let me ride you?" Dakota asked, his words dancing across Jax's belly in breathy puffs of air.

Jax needed so badly, he couldn't even answer. He just nodded, rolling over and clambering to his hands and knees. His head hung low, eyes closed, his entire body trembling with anticipation. He heard Dakota fumble in the nightstand for the slick; then heard nothing at all but the sound of his own heartbeat pounding in his ears as Dakota pushed inside him.

Dakota filled Jax up, fitting him like hand-in-glove, with no room to spare. "Oh, sweet fuck," Jax breathed, lifting his head to gaze over his shoulder at Dakota. Dakota's eyes

were closed, his face composed in rapture. One large hand was massaging the small of Jax's back, the other holding his hip.

"You feel good, Jax, so fucking good. I could stay like this all night."

"Wanna feel you move. Fuck me, Dakota." Jax hissed as Dakota obeyed, hips pumping.

Dakota pulled completely out; then thrust back inside, over and over, teasing him, driving him crazy. Jax felt as if he were on a rollercoaster of extremes; he felt the low of painful emptiness each time Dakota pulled out of his body, followed by an ecstatic high of being filled again.

Jax's hand worked his cock, his weight supported by one arm. He sunk lower, until his cheek pressed against the mattress, his ass held high in the air for Dakota. He cried out as Dakota leaned into him, both hands on his hips, punishing his rear with wickedly hard thrusts.

"Give it up for me, Jax. Want you to come." Dakota's voice sounded far away; Jax was so keyed up, so close, his blood pounding, nerves screaming. His release swirled and spiraled up in a white-hot flash, and he cried out, fisting himself wildly.

"Oh, fuck!" Dakota's groan reached his ears just as he felt a rush of molten heat inside him, filling him, wringing the last few drops of come from his own cock.

It took several minutes before either of them felt like trying to speak. They lay side-by-side on the bed, sweating, breathing hard. Dakota's arm lay heavily over Jax's back; Jax felt Dakota's body temperature slowly cooling down, adding to the clammy chill raising gooseflesh on his skin.

"Lord, that was good," Jax said, turning his head to face Dakota. "Might have to let you give me some bear-loving more often."

"That a fact?"

Oh, didn't he love that slow, knowing smile spreading across Dakota's face, and the tender look in his eyes? "Yup. If you're a good boy, of course."

"I'm *always* good. Better than good, if that look on your face is any indication," Dakota said, chuckling.

"Don't go getting a big head."

"Already got one of those, and for proof, I refer you to my previous comment."

Jax snickered, finding the strength to elbow Dakota. "All right, get up, you lazy sack of bones. Let's go wash up, then raid the refrigerator. I've worked up an appetite."

"Last I checked, I was the one doing all the work." Dakota beamed a sassy grin at him, eyes twinkling.

"Shut up and let's go. Jeez, I never met anybody so full of himself," Jax admonished, struggling to his feet. He made his way toward the bathroom, hearing the bed groan in relief as Dakota stood up.

"You're a little confused, hon. I see to remember it being *you* who was full of *me*. Remember?"

Jax rolled his eyes and snorted, sliding into the bathroom and closing the door in Dakota's face. He laughed at Dakota's surprised grunt, and was still laughing when Dakota jimmied the lock and joined him in the shower.

Under the hot spray, as Dakota's fingers slid soapy trails over his skin, Jax remembered the vague uneasy feeling he'd had earlier, and made a mental note to have another talk with Taylor about staying away from Tai.

Chapter Thirteen

Mal was dead tired. He'd spent the last two weeks out with the fence crew, roughing it. His fingers were sore and blistered from mending dozens of spots in the fence that were weakened by either weather or age, and stringing what felt like miles of barbed wire. His back was sore from sinking fence posts, and spending nights in a sleeping bag on the hard, unforgiving ground. He stank worse than the hog pen, and felt as if he could easily sleep for the next month. He couldn't take it another hour, and rather than spend yet another night out in the field, he'd gone home.

He dragged himself up the porch steps and into the house. Someone was in the kitchen -- he recognized the voices of his parents and uncles chatting, and paused for a moment, listening.

"I got a call this evening from Wheaton, that fellow from the property tax office." It was Uncle Dakota's voice, and he didn't sound happy. "He said he couldn't find any records from when we installed the electric fence, Jax."

"What? Bullshit! I remember filing for the permits, Dakota."

"Well, he says they're not there. Says we're going to have to cut power to the fences for a while, and that we have to file for the permits all over again."

"No. Absolutely not! If we shut down the power, anybody could get in by scaling the fences!" Jax snarled, and Mal shook his head at the ferocity in Jax's voice. He sounded like he was frothing at the mouth. Honestly, somebody needed to sit him down and tell him Cain was dead, and wasn't coming back.

"I reckon we don't have a choice, Jax. I'll see about having the power cut tomorrow. Hopefully, it won't be for long."

He decided he was too tired to even talk. Mal wanted nothing more than a hot shower and a soft bed, and in that order. If he went into the kitchen, he'd be dragged into the argument. Instead, Mal went straight upstairs, without stopping to say hello to anyone. He'd see them in the morning.

The light was on in Tai's bedroom, a thin sliver of yellow peeking out from under the door. That was odd, considering the hour. She usually liked to be in bed by midnight. Tai was a classic morning person. When she came awake, it was fully and instantly, chipper and bright-eyed, unlike Mal, who would sleep all day if ever given the opportunity, and grumbled from the moment his eyes opened until well after breakfast.

Mal paused in front of the door and sighed. He might get away without greeting his parents or uncles, but he'd catch nine kinds of hell if he ignored Tai the same way. *It'll only take a minute, he told himself. Might as well get it over with, then I can shower and*

get to bed. He softly rapped on the door, turned the knob and pushed it open, not waiting for Tai to answer.

"Hey, I just got back and--" He froze, his mouth suddenly gone as dry as if he'd swallowed sawdust, his mind trying to make sense of what his eyes were seeing.

"Mal! What are you doing home?" Tai screeched. She was lying in her bed, clutching the coverlet to her chest. "I thought you were out with the fence crew!"

Seeing Tai in bed wasn't what shocked Mal into silence. That, after all, was exactly where he'd expected to find her.

It was the shape lying next to her that threw him.

"Never mind what *I've* been doing -- what've *you* been doing? Who the fuck is *that*, and what's he doing in your bed?" Mal hissed, stepping fully into the room, swinging the door shut with the heel of his foot. He felt his face heat until he thought his eyeballs might explode out of their sockets from the pressure. Suddenly, he wasn't tired at all anymore. Energy flowed through him; adrenaline made his heart pound and his blood sing through his veins. Muscles bulged and fists curled into balls as Mal's body readied itself for a fight. "Taylor!" he hissed. "Did he force himself in here, Tai? Get up, you sack of shit! I'm going to fucking kill you for touching her!"

"Calm down, Mal!" Tai hissed, sitting up and putting herself between Taylor, who sat up next to her, blinking, and Mal's line of sight.

She didn't succeed. Mal saw nothing but a red, hazy fog. Bric-a-brac on the shelves began to rattle; the lamp on the bedside table shaking as Mal's powers surged. "Are you crazy? What are you doing, Tai?"

Tai had the audacity to roll her eyes at him. "What do you *think* I've been doing? Honestly, Mal, sometimes I wonder about you. I *am* eighteen, you know."

"Yeah, I know. We share the same birthday, remember?" Mal answered sarcastically. "Now, get up out of my sister's bed, asshole. I don't want to get your blood on her comforter."

"Look, Mal, I know you don't like me, but I--" Taylor made a move to stand, but Tai stopped him.

"Get out of the way, Tai. This is between me and him!" Mal yelled. A china shepherdess flew off the shelf and smashed into the wall just over Taylor's head, showering him with bits of broken porcelain.

"Mal! Stop it! This has nothing to do with you!" Tai screeched. "We love each other, and that's all you need to know!"

Mal froze, gaping at Tai. "I can't believe this! Dad is going to gore him when he finds out, and that's only if there's a big enough piece of him left to aim for once Uncle Jax gets through with him! Tai, they're going to freak!"

"It's nobody's business who I decide to sleep with, Mal. Not theirs and not yours! I'm a big girl. I make my own choices, and I chose *him*, Mal."

"Oh, yeah, you're all grown up, aren't you? Except that here *I* am, spending another fucking year on the ranch because *you* didn't want me to leave you here alone!" Mal yelled. "I could've gone south with the herd, but I didn't, because poor little Tai would've been lonely!" He paused only to take a breath, self-pity and jealousy fueling his anger. "He's *human*, Tai. Are you out of your mind?"

"It doesn't matter to me. I love him," Tai said firmly.

Mal laughed scornfully at the stubborn tilt of her chin. "You wouldn't know what love was if it snuck up and took a bite out of your ass, Tai. I stayed behind because you were too much of a baby to weather one fucking winter without me. How can you possibly think you're mature enough to be in love?"

"Hey, watch how you talk to her!" Taylor said. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, only a small swatch of sheet keeping him modest. Mal bristled, and took a few steps in his direction but Tai, keeping the sheet clenched to her chest, moved between them. The stuffed animals piled on her rocker exploded into the air like a handful of polyester-stuffed bottle rockets. The rocker itself skidded across the carpet, smashing into the wall hard enough to leave a dent in the plasterboard.

"Knock it off, Mal!"

"He's got no right, Tai!"

"Yes, he does, because I *gave* him the right! Anyway, this is none of your business!" Tai yelled. Her eyes were flashing, spots of color darkening her cheeks. Mal had never seen her so angry before, but then again, *he'd* never been so furious, either. "You're my brother, not my keeper, Mal!"

"Yeah? Well, maybe you *need* a keeper if you're sleeping with humans, Tai! Do you understand the danger you're in with him? He's not the same as we are. Jax and Dakota should have never let him stay in the first place!" Mal was so furious he could barely see straight. All he wanted to do was rip the man in Tai's bed to shreds, and scatter the pieces to the wind.

"Taylor would never hurt me, Mal," Tai said, glaring at him. "I can't believe you're so prejudiced against humans! You're the one always preaching about us fitting in,

coexisting! Was it all lies, all that time? If I choose to be with a human, then I will, and you have nothing to say about it!"

"What about *my* choices, huh?" Mal spat. "I had to put my life on the back burner, and stay here because of you!" He pointed a shaking finger at Taylor. "He needs to leave this room, the ranch, and preferably the state, right now!"

Tai's eyes grew hard even as her voice dropped to a whisper. He'd never seen her so livid before, her features hard and icy. This wasn't his twin -- this was a stranger wearing Tai's face, and when she spoke again, there was venom in her voice that burned him to his very soul. "You're jealous because I found someone, and you haven't! Well, I have news for you. Nobody's keeping you here, are they? Maybe you *should* leave, Mal. Catch up with the herd. Go south. Go west. Go to hell while you're at it, but just leave us alone!"

Mal felt as if someone had punched him in the gut. All the air whooshed out of his lungs, leaving him feeling dizzy. Tai was telling him to leave? Leave the ranch? Leave *her*? For a moment, he was tempted to jump over her and kill the man sitting next to her on the bed. He hated Taylor suddenly and intensely, for being a human, for being a man, and for coming between him and his twin sister. It was the first time in their lives that Tai had picked someone over Mal, and the pain was almost unbearable.

"Fine! I will!" he bellowed, slamming out of the room. He stomped down the stairs, heading for the front door. To hell with her, to hell with everyone! He was taking her advice and leaving. He should have left weeks ago, with the herd! Months ago! *Years* ago!

"Hey, what's going on up there? What's all the yelling about? Mal? Is that you? What's wrong?" His mother's voice called after him, but it sounded far away, muted by the sound of his blood pounding in his ears. He didn't answer. Fury twisted his stomach, and hurried his step. More than anything, he felt betrayed by Tai. He'd given up his dreams for her. He'd stayed because she hadn't wanted to be alone, and he needed to protect her. To keep her from following him, he'd remained at the ranch.

She, however, clearly didn't hold the same regard for him. She'd jumped into bed with the first bastard to stroll down the pike, and a human at that, and then picked him over her own flesh and blood, her own *twin*, for God's sake! How could she?

Well, it was the absolute end! He was through living his life for everyone else. From now on, he'd live it for himself, not for Tai, or his parents, or his uncles. He'd do what he wanted, when he wanted, and with whom he wanted, and whoever didn't like it could kiss his ass.

As of that very moment, Mal was gone, and quite possibly, for good. He didn't care if he ever saw anyone from the ranch again, not his parents, not his uncles, and especially not Tai.

He was out the door and already stripping out of his clothing before anyone could catch up to him. By the time his parents and uncles made it to the front door, he'd shed his clothes and shifted, and was galloping away across the pasture.

Mal ran for a long while, finding the perimeter fence and racing alongside it. He followed it as it curved back toward the road, heading for the electrified main gate.

For once in my miserable life, Mal thought, *I'm doing what's right* for me. He used his powers to push open the gate, snapping the lock, galloping through the opening, ignoring the shouts of the guard.

"Hey! Hey, you! Mal? Come back here! Your uncles will shit a brick!" the guard called, but Mal didn't even slow his stride. Hooves pounding the dirt, he recklessly negotiated the narrow, steep path up to the main road.

Reaching the outer fence, Mal finally slowed down, sides heaving. He picked his way through the dense forest alongside the outer fence, until the shouts of the guard finally faded away. Mal shifted again, standing naked in the moonlight, the sweat on his skin glinting like drops of molten silver. Concentrating on the fence, he drew on the power that he held within himself again, and it responded at once, bubbling up like lava through his veins.

Barbed wire snapped free from the wood with soft *pinging* sounds; the wood itself cracked and splintered as if shattered by a giant fist, leaving a large gap in the fence. He stepped through, and took a deep breath.

He was free.

And alone.

His anger dissipated, leaving only a deep, aching pain in his heart. He felt drained, and utterly hollow inside.

Without a particular destination in mind, Mal shifted again and began running toward his future.

Chapter Fourteen

Each passing mile seemed to deepen the wedge between Caedes and Nex. It continued to bury itself with each tick of the odometer, until the resulting silence was so thick and stifling that Caedes began to question whether they could ever overcome it.

It had begun when they'd left Gar behind. Caedes couldn't see the logic in continuing on to the ranch and wanted to change their plans, but Nex wouldn't hear of it. Caedes hadn't stopped trying to convince him, but as of yet, he'd had no luck in changing Nex' mind. He couldn't turn the truck around, not without inciting Nex into a rage again.

Caedes was driving while Nex relaxed in the passenger seat, his bare feet propped up on the dashboard. Caedes' fingers drummed the steering wheel as he tried to ignore the tightness in his gut over Nex' stubbornness, the anger at the way he dismissed Caedes' opinions out-of-hand, and a feeling of foreboding that only grew worse with each passing mile.

They'd just begun following the road up into the mountains where they remembered Gar saying the Shifting Sands Ranch was located when Caedes decided to try one last time to make things right between them, and hopefully, sway Nex to Caedes' way of thinking. He feigned hunger, although in truth, his stomach was so knotted he probably couldn't have swallowed a bite. Nevertheless, he persuaded Nex to let him pull over and hunt.

Shortly after they left the truck, stripped, and shifted, he and Nex brought down a deer in the woods just off the highway that led past Jackson Hole and up into the Tetons. Caedes hung back while Nex gorged, which was for the best. Nex had a thing about eating first, and Caedes didn't want to irritate him. Caedes was too occupied to have much of an appetite anyway, trying desperately to come up with a final argument that might change Nex' mind.

After Nex finished eating, the two shifted into their human-forms for the walk back to the truck. They were in sight of the road when Caedes decided to pick their argument up where they'd left it before stopping to hunt. He had to get Nex to change his mind, to see that an attack on the ranch by just the two of them would be nothing less than a suicide run.

"Why, Nex? Why bother with the shifters at the ranch? What could they possibly have that we want? I don't want to spend my life digging in the dirt on a fucking farm! There's a whole world out there, you know. We're finally free -- we can go anywhere, do anything! Canada, Mexico, New York, California...you always wanted to learn to surf. We could go out to Malibu, get a couple of boards--"

"Yeah, sure -- after we kill every last shifter on that fucking ranch," Nex hissed. "We follow Gar's plan first. After we're done, we can head out to the West coast."

"Nex, after everything Gar did to you, why do you still believe what he told us? He was nothing but a liar and a traitor! He tried to kill you! He lied to us about Cain and the shifters at the ranch!"

"No! He's an asshole, but he was right about the ranch. Everything they have -- the money, the land, the females -- it should all be ours. They killed our father, Caed. They owe us!" Nex growled, his teeth dark with blood.

"Do you even hear yourself, Nex? It doesn't make any sense." Caedes saw Nex's eyes flash with anger, and decided to try another tack. "Look, we're not even sure exactly where the ranch is located. Even if we find it, what do we do then?" Caedes pointed out. "We don't have a plan or any weapons, Nex. We can't just waltz in through the front doors and expect everyone there to roll belly up for us!"

"They will. We're the Ultimate Predators. If they don't we'll eat them."

"All of them? Nex, be reasonable! We're good, but there are only two of us. There's probably a lot more of them, and not all of them are prey-shifters! They have teeth, too, Nex. They live in the mountains of Wyoming -- they probably have guns. They killed Cain, for God's sake, and he was a helluva lot bigger than we are! Besides, I think Gar lied to us about Cain, too," Caedes was tired of arguing. He felt his control slip, and his raptor rose up, ready to fight.

"Think about it, Nex! Nothing he told us makes sense! Cain was a T-Rex, and every member of the Predators was a carnivore. How could another pack of shifters attack them on their home territory and win? Even if they did attack, why didn't they kill everyone then, including Cain? I'll tell you what I think. I don't think it ever happened! Cain didn't go up to the ranch for a fucking peace talk -- he went up there for the same reason we are... to take over, and all he got for his trouble was an early grave!"

Nex stopped, and squared off against Caedes. The look in his eyes made Caedes take a step back. "Don't you get it? It doesn't matter whether the stories Gar told us were true! Our father was a great man. He was the biggest, the most powerful; he deserved to take whatever he wanted and so do we! It's the law of the jungle, Caed. We're the best predators. Nothing else on earth is like us. What are you so afraid of?" Nex stared hard at Caedes for a minute, and when he spoke again, it was in a soft, contemptuous voice. "How can you be my twin, and still be such a coward? You're pathetic."

Caedes bared his teeth. "I'm not afraid! I'm being rational. You're not fucking Rambo, Nex. You can't take out an entire compound of shifters by yourself!"

"Yes, I can! I'm my father's son! Cain's blood flows through my veins. You? You're a fucking pussy!" His eyes rolled in their sockets, wild. Caedes could tell Nex was just a heartbeat away from shifting. "You were always jealous of me because I was stronger, the better hunter. Were you in on Gar's plan to kill me? I bet you were -- that's why you

wouldn't let me finish him! That was your plan all along, wasn't it Caed? To get rid of me and keep the ranch for yourself?"

Caedes watched Nex with horror as he worked himself up into a ferocious state. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead; his eyes grew feral, his lips curling over his gums, showing his teeth. Every word he spoke seemed to fuel his rage.

"I was the firstborn and the alpha, and you couldn't stand it! That's it, isn't it, Caedes? You want to kill me so that you can be the strongest! Well, come on! Let's finish this now! I'm sick of you! It's time I was an only child!"

It happened quickly. The attack was so unexpected that Caedes was nearly stunned into immobility. One moment he'd been locking gazes with Nex, staggered by the viciousness of Nex's tirade, the next Nex shifted and sliced at him with a sharp claw. Caedes cried out as pain seared him, looking down at his chest in shock. It was only pure instinct that made him jump back an instant before it would have been too late. If he hadn't, he knew Nex's claw would've disemboweled him.

As it was, Nex had opened a long gash stretching from his collarbone to his navel. It oozed thick blood, wet and almost black in the moonlight. He touched his fingers to it, staring at them wide-eyed, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

He couldn't.

Nex? His own brother, his twin, had attacked him. Pain sharpened Caedes' senses, and when he looked again in Nex's eyes he finally saw the truth gleaming in their rolling, yellow-green depths. Nex was insane. Why hadn't Caedes ever seen it before? In Caedes' mind, their entire life together instantly sprung up in vivid relief. He saw Nex in the hunt, often drawing out his prey's pain before ending its life. For the first time, Caedes realized how much *pleasure* Nex drew from the act of killing. More than once, he remembered Nex beginning to eat his victim while it was still alive. Caedes always excused Nex's behavior as being over-enthusiastic, or due to hunger clouding his judgment. He'd been wrong -- Nex *liked* to hear things scream.

It wasn't just prey Nex liked to torture, either. In a split second, Caedes recalled every instance in which Nex had treated him more like a servant than a brother, how often Nex had made him feel like an omega to Nex's alpha, reminding him that Caedes was the *second*-born twin, the lesser son, mediocre, unworthy, and soft. How often had Nex taunted Caedes, telling him he didn't have the stomach to be an Ultimate Predator, calling Caedes an iguana or gecko?

In Nex's mind, Caedes realized, *Nex* was the only true Ultimate Predator, and everyone else, including Caedes once he'd fulfilled his purpose in helping Nex rise to the top of the food chain, was on the menu.

Movement startled Caedes out of his shock. He shifted, twisting to the side just in time to avoid Nex's second attack. Jaws lined with sharp, curved, backward-angled teeth designed to slash and tear, streaked toward him, snapping at the air, missing their mark by millimeters. Caedes felt Nex's hot breath ghost over his flank.

Twin roars of rage tore through the silence of the forest as the brothers faced each other, rolling in waves across the foothills of the mountains. Small fauna darted for cover; even the wind seemed to still its rustling through the leaves.

They circled one another, keen eyes following every movement, every muscle twitch, every breath, anticipating the other's strikes. One would feint in, but the other would sidestep the attack. Nex leapt, claws extended, but landed in the brush where only a heartbeat before, Caedes had stood. Caedes ducked low, charging forward, jaws agape, but tasted only air as Nex backpedaled and spun out of the way.

Without the element of surprise, Nex didn't have a chance in taking Caedes down. No matter what Nex thought to the contrary, Caedes was every bit as experienced and capable a hunter as Nex, equally as strong and quick. He knew Nex's habits too well, had hunted with his twin too often.

For every move Nex made, Caedes countered with the same lightning-fast reflexes, but he knew that eventually the blood he was losing from the one gash in his flesh Nex had scored was beginning to take its toll. The edges of his vision grayed; only sheer determination and savage instinct allowed him to continue to avoid Nex's assaults.

He couldn't keep it up much longer. Given another few minutes, he knew he would falter. One misstep, one miscalculation and Nex would snuff out his life with a single, fatal bite. The will to live was strong, though; it gave Caedes a last surge of strength and he focused again, took another breath, and readied himself to attack.

Suddenly, something that sounded like pounding hooves on hard pavement reached them, momentarily distracting their attention from the battle. The noise was drawing closer, getting louder. They were in the high country, and the sound could mean someone was coming on horseback. Their battle had taken them very close to the black macadam of the twisting highway. Only the shortest, sparsest of brush shielded them from the road and the eyes of any passersby. They'd be seen, and no matter which of them won their deadly contest, the victor would be exposed.

Caedes could see indecision flickering in Nex's eyes. Should he finish Caedes off or eradicate the new threat first?

Caedes seized the opportunity and struck without hesitation, leaping forward, his six-inch claw opening a wound in Nex's belly that was deep and deadly. He bit at the same time, his teeth clamping around the soft, exposed throat under Nex's jaws. Blood filled Caedes' mouth, coppery, hot, and thick.

The taste of his brother's blood on his tongue shocked Caedes out of his murderous rage. Screaming his fury and heartache to the sky, Caedes shifted back into human form. He was covered in Nex's blood; his face was smeared with it, and more ran in rivulets over his chest, mixing with his own blood that continued to seep from his wound. Nex fell forward, his body heavy in Caedes' arms, dragging him to the ground.

He sat there, cradling Nex' reptilian head in his lap, tears washing a pink path through the blood on his cheeks. Nex's eyes were glassy, staring; death was already casting its pall across them. "Oh, God, Nex! Why did it have to come to this? Why didn't you listen? I loved you! Oh, sweet fuck, what did I do?" he cried, rocking back and forth. "I'm sorry, Nex! I'm so sorry!"

Caedes' injury was still bleeding, but he was far too wrapped up in a tight cloak of grief to notice. The pain in his heart overwhelmed the physical pain caused by his wound, and kept the encroaching darkness at bay. Though the agony in his heart was razor sharp, he was dimly aware of the hoof beats growing louder, and of a large shape looming out of the brush. Before he could make sense of what creature had barged in on his grief, his brain finally shut down, and he slumped over the body of his brother, unconscious.

Mal shifted, his shock at what he was seeing undermining his ability to hold his horse-form. The scene before him was a contrast in extremes, and it held him mesmerized.

Just a few feet away on the battle-scarred earth, against a backdrop of lush greenery, naked and splattered with blood was the most beautiful man Mal had ever seen.

Lying next to him, its head cradled on the handsome man's lap, was the ugliest creature Mal had ever laid eyes on.

Mal's eyes flicked from the man's striking face to the reptilian head he held on his lap. Pebbled skin, a snout full of wicked teeth, and cold eyes glazed with death were in direct contrast to the lovely face of the man. Mal knew in an instant what the creature was and where it'd come from, and the knowledge sent a chill rippling down his spine. *A dinosaur. It's a fucking dinosaur!*

There was only one living thing Mal had ever heard of that might have spawned such a being.

Cain.

Run, he told himself. Shift and run straight back to the ranch. You have to warn everybody. Tell them the Ultimate Predators are back! Uncle Jax was right all along!

Only the fact that the creature was obviously dead kept Mal from panicking. The man, on the other hand, was still breathing. He was captivatingly handsome, and appeared to be

about Mal's age. His silky black hair fell in a wild tangle, his body firm and perfectly sculpted. Even though blood covered most of him, his smooth, golden skin reminded Mal of molten bullion poured over strong muscles. Mal could smell him, even through the stench of blood and death that permeated the area. His scent was musky and masculine, and both he and the reptilian horror he held smelled strongly of the unique scent of shifter.

Mal couldn't move. It was as if his feet had thrown down roots into the soil. The dinosaur was obviously dead, but the man was alive, although injured; a long gash across his chest and stomach oozed blood. Mal's mind urged him to flee, but he couldn't force himself to do it. He couldn't leave the man to freeze to death, or bleed out.

A thought passed through his mind, fleeting but disturbing. How had the man, no matter his shifter-form, managed to kill a dinosaur? It had taken heavy artillery to bring down Cain, according to Mal's folks and uncles. Although the one lying dead in front of him didn't reach anywhere near the size of Cain's T-Rex, it would still certainly be formidable. He filed his worries away to mull over later; right now, the stranger needed help.

Squatting down, trying to ignore the corpse of the hideous dinosaur, Mal held his right hand over the man's wound. He closed his eyes, and let his power flow through his fingers. The gash was long, but thankfully not deep. It had sliced through the skin and some muscle, but hadn't scored on any internal organs. He sighed, opening his eyes, gazing at the unconscious man. He would live, but only if his wound was tended and cleaned. Mal could only diagnose the extent of his injuries -- Tai was the healer.

Mal sat quietly observing the man. He was handsome -- no, beyond that, he was singularly the most attractive man Mal had ever seen. His hair was longish, inky black, and glimmered with silver highlights in the moonlight. Long, dark lashes lay against the pale skin of his cheeks; his mouth was generous, his parted lips made Mal think of soft, sweet kisses. His body was powerful and muscular, if lean. Mal judged him at least as tall as himself.

Who are you? Mal wondered, barely resisting the urge to run the pad of his thumb across the grain of the stubble darkening the man's jaw. *Where did you come from?*

His earlier question rose again, refusing to be quieted, and he whispered it aloud. "How did you kill a dinosaur?"

The man's lashes fluttered, his eyes flashing partway open before drifting closed again. Mal saw his eyes only for the space of a heartbeat, but it was long enough to get his answer. The eyes revealed in the moonlight were yellow-green, the pupils elongated and reptilian.

You killed him because you're one, too, Mal thought with a sudden jolt of horror. *A dinosaur... like Cain. An Ultimate Predator.*

Mal's leg muscles tightened, preparing to launch his body into flight. He needed to run away, as fast and as far as he could, and warn everyone; better yet, he should do the right thing and end the man's life while he was still unconscious. It would be a mercy compared to what Jax and Dakota would do when they got hold of him.

He reached for the man's throat with the intention of quickly, quietly sending him into eternal slumber, but instead, his fingers brushed along the man's cheek. He felt warm skin much like his own, stubbled with the prickly beginnings of a beard. Mal's thumb traced a high cheekbone, and touched lips that were lush and full. His fingers slid through silky hair, wild and long; a shell-like ear, the curve of the man's neck, the hard muscle of his shoulder.

"What if I'm wrong?" Mal whispered to himself. "Maybe you're not who I think you are. Coincidences happen, right? There are lots of wolf and bear shifters. Horses, too. I don't have any proof you're related to Cain, or mean us harm." He tried to convince himself of it, gently stroking the man's cheek.

Something deep inside Mal jerked awake, taking him by surprise. A feeling of protectiveness, every bit as strong as what he felt for Tai, along with other, equally intense feelings of need and lust spun together in a tornado of confusing emotions. Through it all, came a thought much like a single, pencil-thin beam of brilliant light shining through a riotous thunderstorm, and he knew exactly what he needed to do.

Save him.

Mal couldn't bring the man back to the ranch -- that was something Mal knew he couldn't *ever* do, no matter what the circumstances. Jax and Dakota would skin Mal alive if he did, and he wouldn't blame them at all. If this man was who Mal thought, then he was the enemy, exactly whom the electric fences were meant to keep out. He and his kind were the cause behind the smothering overprotection that drove Mal to contemplate leaving the Shifting Sands -- people to be feared and loathed.

Slipping his arms under the man's shoulders and under his knees, Mal heaved him up and began to walk, leaving the carcass of the dinosaur and every one of his misgivings behind. There was one place where Mal knew he could safely bring the man, tend to his wounds, and discover why he was in the territory of the Shifting Sands Ranch. The small cave at the secret waterfall where he and Tai went to be alone would offer them shelter from the cold. There was fresh water nearby, and more importantly, privacy in abundance. Mal would take the man there, make the trip back to the ranch for a few provisions, and return with Tai so she could heal his wounds.

Providing, of course, that Tai would speak to him again after the awful things he'd said to her. Mal was suddenly acutely aware of how wrong he'd been about Tai and Taylor. Taylor was only human, and had never lifted a finger to hurt anyone. How much worse

was it for Mal to be helping someone who might very well turn out to be a mortal enemy of everyone at the ranch?

None of it mattered. The only thing that did was the beautiful man in Mal's arms, and the overpowering need Mal felt to keep him safe.

This would be so much easier if he were awake, Mal thought. I could shift and carry him there easily. Mal sighed, feeling the man's weight straining the muscles of his arms and back. He resolutely trudged on, heading back the way he'd come.

Chapter Fifteen

The cave was lit only by a small campfire. The weak, flickering flames cast dancing shadows on the cold, rough rock walls. The space inside was small though, and easily warmed by the fire. Their body heat alone would have almost been enough to warm the area, if not for the cold gusts of wind that sometimes blew in from the mouth of the cave. The weather had turned suddenly, soon after Mal discovered the dinosaur and man on the side of the road. It had begun snowing a short while later; now the fat flakes were coming down harder, thicker, obscuring the view of the cascading waterfall, although its watery music still filled the air.

The man was finally beginning to stir. Mal sat on the opposite side of the fire, watching him carefully. He'd cleaned the man's wound as best he could, and was pleased to see the shifter's hardy nature at work. The gash stopped bleeding, although it still looked angry, red, and raw.

Huge black eyes, confused and wary, blinked up at him. They were filled with such sorrow that they brought a lump to Mal's throat and held him spellbound. "Hey," Mal said in a soft voice. "Don't be afraid. You're safe here."

"Who are you? Where am I? Where's Nex?" Before Mal could answer, the truth suddenly flared in the man's eyes and they quickly filled with tears, his face stricken. "Oh, God... h-he's dead, isn't he? I killed him. My own twin brother," the man whispered. His low-pitched voice, jagged with emotion, sliced through Mal's heart. "He tried to kill me. I think he lost his mind. Oh, God, why didn't Gar let us die? What am I going to do without Nex?" A new freshet of tears flowed from eyes so dark they seemed bottomless. The man began to shake, turning his face away from the light of the fire.

Mal moved toward the man, unable to keep his distance, drawn by the pain etching his beautiful face. "Hey... it's okay. You had to defend yourself." Mal gently stroked the man's hair, wanting badly to ease his suffering. Mal settled for trying to distract him from it. "I'm Mal. What's your name?"

"C-Caedes. Please, you have to leave me alone. You don't know what I am--"

"You're a shifter. Don't worry -- so am I. I'm a horse-shifter."

Caedes gasped, his face turning toward Mal's, his luminous, dark eyes wide. "You're from... the ranch?"

Mal nodded slowly. "You know about us, huh?" He held his breath, suspecting what was coming next and hoping he was wrong.

He wasn't.

Caedes nodded slowly, and suddenly there was a hard glint burning behind his tears. "Your people killed my father."

Mal felt the blood drain from his face, his earlier thoughts confirmed, a chill ripping through him that had nothing to do with the cold wind. "You're Cain's son? Your father came to our ranch and nearly killed my family!"

Caedes opened his mouth but, to Mal's surprise, didn't speak for a moment. Instead, he nodded slowly, his expression softening again. Mal would have thought Caedes would at least deny it, but he didn't. He felt the icy finger of fear tracing his spine. Caedes *was* one of them, the ones Jax and the rest had long warned him and Tai about -- an Ultimate Predator.

Caedes was alone, though, and he hadn't threatened Mal, even when their identities became clear. He looked so lost and heartbroken over his brother's death... Mal simply couldn't see Caedes as one of the bloodthirsty killers. All he could see was a guy his own age, beautiful, and so very, very sad.

"I guess you're right. I suspected it for a long time now. Gar -- he was the shifter who raised my brother and me -- always told us your people came down to the Everglades and attacked first. That wasn't true, was it?" There was a pleading look in Caedes' eyes, as if he were hoping against hope that Mal would tell him what he most wanted to hear. Mal almost hated to set him straight.

"No, it's not true, Caedes. It happened the year my sister and I were born. I don't remember any of it personally, of course. I only know what everyone's told me since I've been old enough to understand. Cain came to kidnap my mother and kill everyone else."

Again, Caedes nodded. "Gar's story never really made sense to me, but Nex believed it." Suddenly, his face went slack as if his grief weighed down his features; his eyelids squeezed shut and his lips pressed tightly together into a thin, white line. He shoved his hands through his hair, then covered his face with them, shaking. "I killed him. I'm just like my father -- a murderer! A monster!"

"He attacked you, you said," Mal reminded him in a whisper. "You're injured, Caedes. You were only defending yourself."

"It doesn't matter. What am I going to do now?" Caedes whispered. "I wish I was dead, too."

"Don't say that!" Mal hissed, far more forcefully than he intended. He felt as startled as Caedes looked at his tone. "I mean, you shouldn't think like that. Look, you're moving too much. You're bleeding again."

"Why do you care? Why did you bring me here? Why didn't you kill me when you had the chance?"

Mal turned his head slightly, trying to find the words to explain something he didn't really understand himself. "I didn't know who you were at the time, and I wouldn't have killed you, even if I did! I don't care what your father did -- *you* didn't do a damn thing to me, or my family. Besides, you're hurt. I couldn't leave you there."

"You shouldn't have brought me here, Mal. You don't know what I change into--"

"Yeah, I think I do. A dinosaur," Mal said. "You said it... *he* was your twin." He felt a shiver tickle his spine and he turned and poked the fire with a stick to cover it, sending a stream of sparks floating to the roof of the cave. "Your eyes opened for a second before you woke up, and they looked sort of... reptilian." There was a pause, a heavy silence hanging between them. "I figured you probably shared the same shifter-shape, like me and my sister, Tai."

Caedes nodded. "Yeah. His name was Nex." Caedes' voice caught on the word. "I'm a velociraptor, too, like him."

Mal's eyebrow arched. "A raptor? Sort of like the ones in the movie, *Jurassic Park*?"

"*Just* like in *Jurassic Park*. When Nex and I hunted, nothing escaped." There was a trace of pride in Caedes' voice, intermingling with the grief over his brother's death.

"Your brother didn't look like the ones in the movie."

"That was a *movie*. We're the real deal," Caedes huffed, sounding a little offended. "You said you're a horse. Would that be a horse like the ones in those *My Little Pony* cartoons, with pink, fluffy manes and tails, and sparkles, and shit?"

"Of course not!" Mal sputtered, insulted at being compared to a childish TV character. "I'm a black stallion, and Tai is a white mare. We're twins, too."

"Well, there you go. It's the difference between real and make-believe, Mal. Nex and I aren't some cheesy CGI effects. I mean, we *weren't*... he wasn't..." Caedes' voice trailed off, and Mal saw the memory of Nex's death again wash over Caedes' face. His eyes squeezed shut, as if against the pain.

"Sorry. I was just surprised, that's all. Everybody knows what horses look like, but dinosaurs are sort of outside my realm of experience, you know?"

A tiny, wry smile hitched one corner of Caedes' mouth. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Listen, Caedes... I'm going to go back to the ranch. I'll only be gone an hour or so, and when I come back, I'll bring my sister, Tai. She can heal your injuries." Mal saw skepticism flash in Caedes' dark eyes, and sought to nip it in the bud. "No CGI effects

here, either, bud. I can diagnose injuries, and my sister can heal them. It's the truth. She'll have you up and around in a couple of minutes."

"How?"

"Truthfully? I have no friggin' idea. We just can. I checked you out--"

Caedes' lips slipped back into the small grin. "You checked me out?"

Mal felt his face grow hot, and he turned to the fire, hoping it would mask the sudden, flaring heat in his cheeks. "I *meant* I checked your injuries. There isn't anything too serious. The worst is the slash on your stomach, and even that's not too deep. I couldn't find any internal injuries, either. Risk of infection is your worst problem, although you were bleeding pretty heavily when I found you. I think your shapeshifting abilities enabled your wounds to clot, and they're starting to scab already, but Tai can make them disappear altogether."

"I'll be okay. Don't go, please? I don't think I can handle meeting anyone else from the ranch -- not yet. You might forgive me for being Cain's son, but I'll bet not everybody at the ranch feels that way."

"You can't help who you were born to, Caedes. Your father was a monster -- that doesn't make you one, too."

"I wish he wasn't my father. I wish I had a normal family -- or at least, as normal as shapeshifters can get. Nex was just like Cain -- what if I snap someday, and go crazy, too?"

A thought suddenly occurred to Mal. "You *do* have family, Caedes! You have a cousin, once removed, or something."

"W-what?" Caedes' dark eyes flashed open wide. He looked stunned by the news.

"His name is Aiden, and he was Cain's cousin. That makes him your second cousin, or great-cousin, or something, right? He's part of your family, Caedes, and Aiden is cool. He's nice, you know? He's always been like an uncle to Tai and me."

Caedes looked skeptical. "I don't know, Mal. What does he shift into?"

"An eagle, but I've heard rumors that he has a second form. Something from your side of the family, I think. I was told it looks sort of like a dragon or a pterodactyl, or both, maybe. I've never seen it, myself."

"Gar never mentioned him."

"Cain probably never talked about him. Aiden left the commune he and Cain were raised in when he was a teenager. Maybe Cain thought he was dead," Mal added, shrugging his shoulders. "Look, whether or not you decide to come to the ranch and meet anyone else, I'm going to go get Tai. She'll heal you, and then you can decide what you want to do."

"Go back if you want. I'll be okay, but give me a day or two to rest. I'll leave then, and you won't even have to tell your family you found me. I'll never come back, Mal. I promise."

Mal felt his heart skip a beat. "No, that's not acceptable!" He suddenly felt inexplicably shy, turning to poke at the fire again. "You don't have anywhere to go, you said so yourself. The truth is, I had an argument with my sister -- it's why I left the ranch tonight." He tried to shrug, but it felt stiff and stilted. "I'll hang around here for a while. We'll clean off your wounds, see how you do."

"You don't have to stay."

"Yeah, well... I don't have to leave either." Mal turned back to Caedes, and saw something soft glimmering in his eyes. It touched a place deep within Mal, and rekindled the confused emotions he'd felt earlier.

"Are you sure?"

Mal nodded, and smiled. "Let's get you cleaned up. Then I'm going to take a shower in the waterfall -- I reek."

The soft smile that lifted Caedes' lips sent Mal's spirit soaring. To cover the answering grin that tried to spread across his face, he busied himself digging through the small piles of material left behind by himself and Tai the last time they'd been to the cave. He found an old shirt, stiff with age, which he figured he could use to wash Caedes' wounds. He also came across an unopened bag of potato chips, and a candy bar still in the wrapper. Old and stale, they'd still probably be edible -- he'd worry about securing real food later.

For now, it was enough to take care of Caedes and see about getting clean himself.

Chapter Sixteen

Several days passed, marked only by the slow rising and setting of the sun seen through the shimmering fall of water outside the cave's mouth. Caedes' wounds were healing well, enough so that, even though they still pained him, he was able to go for short walks in the surrounding forest. It was just as well -- the one bag of chips and the candy bar Mal found disappeared quickly between the two of them. They were hungry, and while Mal could shift and graze, he couldn't bring himself to kill anything for Caedes. Caedes had to do his own hunting.

Mal found Caedes to be remarkably sensitive to his feelings. While Mal knew Caedes hunted, he never brought a kill back to the cave, and always washed up before coming inside. Whatever his prey, he must've dispatched it quickly, because Mal never once heard a scream or whimper of pain, for which he was grateful.

At the moment, they were stretched out alongside the fire. Both had eaten well that day, and they'd passed the evening playing checkers with rocks and pebbles on a board drawn in the well-packed dirt of the cave floor. Now they were feeling lazy, dozing a little in the warmth of the fire.

Mal rolled to his back, watching Caedes out of the corner of his eye. He never got tired of looking at Caedes, although he tried not to be obvious about it. It wasn't just Caedes' face, which Mal found incredibly handsome, or his body, which Mal found amazingly sexy. There was something else, something less tangible, which struck a chord deep within Mal. He'd felt it from the very first moment he'd laid eyes on Caedes, and it'd only grown stronger with each passing minute.

It was in his laughter, Mal decided, and in his soft voice. It was in his dark eyes, when they glimmered with tears, or sparkled with humor. It was in the electricity that passed between them on the rare occasions they touched, in the way Mal's body reacted forcibly whenever he allowed himself the luxury of visually exploring Caedes' slender form, even from afar.

He wanted Caedes, pure and simple. Not just for sex, although the prospect was never far from Mal's mind, and never failed to harden his body when he allowed himself to think about it. He wanted Caedes... period, as a friend, and as a lover. The thought of Caedes leaving, of Mal never seeing him again, left a cold and hollow feeling deep inside. With a sudden flash of insight, Mal understood Tai must've had the same instant connection with Taylor. If anyone told Mal he couldn't see Caedes again, he knew he'd react as furiously as Tai had.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Mal's cheeks flamed as Caedes caught him staring -- again. "Oh? Do you have a penny? Where are you keeping them without pockets? Oh, never mind... I don't really want to know."

Caedes laughed, rolling up on his side. His long dark hair fell in a tangle over his shoulder. Mal felt Caedes' eyes gazing at him, and couldn't keep himself from looking back. As Caedes' laughter faded, something glowed in his black eyes, glittering in them like stars. When he spoke again, his voice was as soft as a breeze, sultry and low. "You look at me a lot, Mal. I was wondering... do you like what you see?"

Lie, Mal told himself firmly. Say something funny. He's only teasing you. If he realizes you're serious, he'll leave. Mal couldn't do it, though, couldn't take his own advice, not with Caedes' eyes sparkling at him from across the fire pit, and his voice touching places deep within Mal's soul that had been lonely for so long.

"Yeah, I do, Caedes," he replied in a whisper. His body tensed, waiting for the laughter or derision he felt sure would be coming.

It never did.

"I like looking at you, too, Mal. I like it a lot." Caedes rose gracefully, standing up, looking down at Mal in silence.

Mal couldn't breathe, couldn't take his eyes off Caedes as he walked around the fire, and lowered himself to Mal's side. When Caedes' fingers gently stroked his cheek, Mal actually whimpered.

"Do you want me, Mal? Please, be honest. It's okay if you don't. I'll understand," Caedes whispered. "I know I've got a lot going against me, and you... you're so goddamn beautiful, so sweet and nice... all things I don't have a lot of experience with, things I know I don't deserve."

Mal found his voice. "Don't say that!" He sat up, looking into Caedes' eyes, his body tingling and hardening. "You've got this image of yourself that's so skewed, Caed! You're punishing yourself for your genetics, and that's got nothing to do with who you are." He reached up, skimming his knuckles across Caedes' scruffy jaw. "Do you know what I see when I look at you? I see a guy so handsome he takes my breath away. I see somebody who, even though I know he's hurting, hikes further than he needs to when he hunts, because he doesn't want me to hear. Who never comes back without picking some berries for me along the way. A guy who trusted me with his secrets, and makes me really glad I brought him here."

Caedes' lips lifted in a soft smile. "Yeah? You really see all that?"

"I do. I want you, Caedes. I just wasn't sure if it was your thing."

"It is, as long as it's with you." Heat flared in Caedes' eyes, fueling the warmth in Mal's groin.

"I need to tell you, I'm not proficient at... you know. I've never exactly done anything before," Mal confessed. If they were being truthful, he might as well be completely honest with Caedes from the get-go.

"Yeah? Me neither. I could never get away from Gar and Nex long enough to find anybody," Caedes said.

Mal didn't miss the way Caedes' voice caught on his brother's name, or the sadness that dampened the ardor in Caedes' eyes. Mal couldn't have that, not now, and did the only thing he could think of to keep Caedes from slipping back into a depression over Nex's death. He leaned in and kissed Caedes -- hard.

It was clumsy and a little awkward. Their noses bumped, and there was a great deal of teeth clacking, but it was still the most wonderful, amazing moment of Mal's life. His entire body responded to their kiss, skin heating, his cock filling. A terrifying, yet electrifying feeling of anticipation quickly built, and his heart started racing. When Caedes' hand cupped the back of his head, pulling him in deeper, his lips parted for Caedes' tongue.

Oh, he'd dreamt about this moment. He'd read about it in the magazines he'd ordered online, the kind mailed to the house in plain, brown-paper wrappers, fantasized about it with his hand on his cock under the covers, but what he'd imagined it would feel like hadn't even come close to reality. Everything within him, every cell, every molecule, snapped awake with the touch of Caedes' tongue to his.

Caedes moved closer, until his body bumped up flush against Mal's. Although they continued to explore each other's mouths, Mal was acutely aware of every inch of Caedes' hard body pressed against his; he imagined he could feel every muscle, every bone, every hair, in particular the extraordinarily hot and firm piece of flesh searing his thigh. His hand instinctively reached for Caedes' cock, fingers wrapping around the thick, silky organ.

When Caedes moaned into Mal's mouth, low, hoarse, and he felt drops of wetness on his fingers, Mal's own cock twitched. "Touch me, Caedes. Please?" he whispered, feeling so incredibly needful and aching hard that he had to close his eyes against the burn of tears.

Caedes' hand on him felt so right, so good, better than anything Mal could've possibly dreamed. It was so different from his own hand, and yet the same, stroking him slowly, gently. He couldn't resist -- as much he found he loved kissing Caedes, he had to see, had to watch. Pulling away from Caedes' lips, he looked down between them.

Their cocks were close enough together that Mal and Caedes' knuckles sometimes brushed as they stroked one another. Caedes' cock was uncut, but similar to Mal's in size. He loved the feel of it, of the hard core wrapped in silky softness, the heat that seared his

palm, and the sticky drops of precome wetting his fingers. He loved the smell, musky and manly, and especially liked the noises Caedes was making.

Caedes' free hand slid along Mal's hip, fingers digging in. "I'm going to come, Mal. Make me come!" he gasped.

Mal felt his heart rate triple. Oh, yes, he wanted this most of all! "Oh, fuck yeah, Caedes! Come for me!" he whispered. Mal felt Caedes' entire body tighten, and watched him shoot his load, the smell of his sex filling Mal's nostrils.

He inhaled deeply, then gave in to the mounting pressure he'd felt building all along, letting his release sweep over him. He cried out as he came, and only later, after he'd stopped trembling, did he realize he'd called Caedes' name.

"Oh, man. Oh, fuck," he said, once he could speak again. Small tremors still ran through him, like the aftershocks of a strong quake, and when he looked into Caedes' eyes, he saw in them a reflection of everything he was feeling.

After a couple of minutes, when they both finally got over the shock of their first shared orgasm, Caedes gave a small laugh, and lifted a hand, sticky with Mal's come. "I'd high-five you, but it would be a little messy."

Mal laughed, grinning sheepishly. "That was unbelievable. You were incredible."

"No, it wasn't me. It was you."

"That was your hand on me, last I checked," Mal said, still smiling.

"Yeah, but it was *your* hand on *me*."

"Guess we're both pretty amazing then. I so want to do that again."

"Oh, hell, yeah. Definitely want another go-round, but I'm thinking we may need a few minutes to regroup first," Caedes said, smirking at him.

"Okay, I'm willing to wait awhile, but next time..."

"Next time, what?" Caedes asked, arching an eyebrow at him.

"Well, there are other things we could try, you know."

"Yeah? Like what, for example?"

Mal's face split into a grin as he outlined a few of the things he most wanted to try, the details of which he'd lifted directly from the pages of the those brown-paper wrapped magazines he had hidden under his mattress at the ranch.

Caedes eyes got larger and larger, until Mal worried they'd pop right out of his head. "Well, what do you know? I may not need much of a rest after all," he said, looking down between himself and Mal. "From the looks of things, neither will you."

Mal's answering grin said it all.

Chapter Seventeen

A small, crooked smile tilted Joe Wheaton's lips as he threw a small black duffle bag into the passenger seat of his truck and slid behind the wheel. He was proud of himself. Although he'd hit a few snags in his quest to get an order for the power to be shut down to the fences at the Shifting Sands, he hadn't lost his cool.

He'd come close to losing control several times, beginning with the files. He supposed it was too much to hope for, that Wells and Greene might've actually made a mistake; that an oversight occurred and they didn't have the proper permits for the fences. A brief look at the files revealed that all the necessary paperwork had been filed, approved, and the permits issued years ago, which necessitated a lengthy hunting process through the archives to find and shred the paper trail. Just when Joe finished arranging the files to his satisfaction, old Judge Anderson died before Joe could get him to sign the order shutting the power to the fences. The old fart went ass-end up in the middle of the sand trap on the fourteenth hole at the club.

Finding another judge willing to sign off on the order had been slow going, and Joe needed to do some fancy footwork to get one to work with him. Most had full dockets, and didn't consider a case of missing paperwork on an electric fence to be worthy of their time, particularly since the fence had been operational for eighteen years. A simple oversight, they said, or a filing error. Just have them fill out new paperwork.

He'd finally resorted to bribery to get his order signed. Judge Billings' accepted a bottle of fine Scotch and a box of outrageously expensive cigars for doing the deed. Joe made a mental note to kick Billings' bony, greedy ass out of office the moment Joe became governor.

The last hurdle turned out to be the highest one to jump, and came just the night before in the form of the town's only police cruiser, a late model Expedition, churning up the gravel of the long driveway leading to Joe's house.

Joe had just come home from playing a round of golf at the club, a much-needed break after the last couple of stressful weeks he'd endured, and the last thing he wanted was a conversation with the town's sheriff.

Ed Perrelli was a big man, and both his weight and his age showed as he clambered out from behind the wheel, heading toward Joe. Wearing his beige polyester uniform, cowboy hat and boots, his gold badge pinned to chest, he looked the part of a small town sheriff. Joe's daddy always hated Perrelli. Joe remembered their long-standing feud had something to do with the woman Perrelli married. Daddy said Perrelli's wife was a cocktease. She flirted with Daddy all the time when Perrelli wasn't looking, but refused to carry through on her promises. Daddy said she led Perrelli around by his pecker, too.

It always came down to women, didn't it? Joe thought. *Church smiles and whore smiles, all of them.*

Still, Perrelli was the only law in town, and by the time Joe opened the door he'd forced his lips to curl into a cordial smile. "Evening, Ed. What can I do for you?"

"I heard you've been giving the Shifting Sands Ranch grief over some missing permits."

"Oh? Why, who told you that, sheriff?" Joe asked, straining to keep his voice civil. He still had a thousand things to do, and didn't want to spend any of his precious time wasting oxygen with Perrelli.

"I got a call from the boys at the ranch. Said you called them, told them they had to shut down the power. That true, Joe?"

"Yes, that much is true. I did tell them to shut it down."

"Damn it, Joe, I've warned you before about overstepping your authority. I thought we'd settled this back when you tried to arrest Margaret Winston for not filing for a permit to put up that screen room of hers. Remember that?"

Joe stiffened, remembering the very public dressing-down Perrelli saw fit to give him that day, in the middle of the town's municipal building, in full view of Joe's co-workers. It was only by sheer force of will that he kept his lips curved in a smile. "This is different, Ed. They're operating that fence without a license. I didn't try to arrest them, and I got a court order for the shut down. Enforcing the order is *your* job, if they don't comply with it."

"Bullshit. Ronny held your job since God was in diapers, and he never saw anything wrong with the ranch's files. Somebody must've misfiled the damn paperwork, that's all. Go on back to the office and look again. I'll give the ranch a call and tell them they can put the juice back on until we get it all sorted out," Perrelli said, fingering his radio.

A slight twitch in Joe's left eye was the only outward indication of the angry fist that suddenly twisted his gut. After all the trouble Joe had gone to, he wasn't about to let this two-bit, pompous, asshole with a badge derail his plans.

After all, Tai was waiting for Joe at the ranch. There was no telling what sort of trouble she might get into if Joe didn't take her away from there. She already had so many sins to make amends for that he didn't want to have to add to the list. Hell, she was probably fucking half the ranch by now. He had to put a stop to it, and soon.

"No, Ed. I'm afraid I can't do that. I'm not busting anyone's chops or overstepping this time. Believe me when I say I have far better things to do with my time than to create new problems for me to solve. The simple fact of the matter is that the ranch was amiss in filing for permits pertaining to the electrified fence surrounding their property," Joe replied, lifting his chin defiantly. "They weren't misfiled. They weren't filed at *all*, and Ronny either ignored the proper procedures, hadn't been paying attention to what he was

doing, or was just too damned lazy to do his job. I'm not blaming Ronny, but I *will* correct his mistake."

Perrelli sighed, as if standing on Joe's porch in the early evening hours was a sore waste of his time and energy. "If they didn't file for permit, I'm sure it was just an oversight, Joe. They're good folk, good neighbors. They'll get it done quick enough, if you just give them a little time. I don't need to remind you of everything the ranch has done for this community. The taxes they paid helped us build the new high school, and they're generous with donations to the fire department. They even bought us the new ambulance."

And your new cruiser, Joe added silently. "I don't think I have to remind *you* about the serious nature of this problem, Ed, or how the voters would frown on anyone who put the town in harm's way. How dangerous do you think it is for the ranch to be operating that fence up there? Without a permit or an inspection, we have no idea if it was correctly installed. Even if it was, how do we know if it's been properly maintained all these years? With all the deadfall in the forest, and the dry summer we've had, one stray spark might cause a fire that could sweep down the mountain, burning everything in its path, including our town!" Joe's voice threatened to rise in pitch, and he had to fight to keep it within normal range. All he really wanted to do was to scream in the sheriff's doughy face, or better yet, beat it to a pulp.

"You know what I think? I think something's going on here that smells twice as shitty as last week's road kill. The boys at the ranch have always obeyed the law to the letter. They never speed through town like some folks; never caused any trouble, not once in all the years I've been sheriff." Perrelli leveled a baleful gaze at Joe that Joe found extremely difficult to return without squirming. "Could be somebody has it in for them, maybe did a little *creative* filing. Those permits cost a heap of money as I recall, and if the fines are compounded over the last eighteen years... Could be somebody is looking to fatten up their department's bank account at the ranch's expense. If so, then I'm going to find out who's behind it. If not, and there really wasn't a permit issued, then we'll get it straightened out with the ranch."

Joe's eyes narrowed, his vision momentarily fogged by a red haze of fury. "Are you accusing me of--"

"I'm not accusing you of anything... yet, but I *am* ordering you to hold off until I can get to the bottom of this. I'll see the mayor tonight, and talk it over with him. I'll get back to you tomorrow. Until then, stay away from the ranch, Joe. If you don't, I'll arrest you for interfering with a police investigation. Understood?" Perrelli snapped his jaw shut and spun on his heel, ending the conversation without giving Joe the chance to say another word.

Panic gripped Joe's heart and rapidly whipped it against his ribcage as he watched Perrelli turn away. *I have to stop him before he makes a mess of everything! If Ed starts poking his nose into the files, he might figure out what I did. Everything, all of my dreams will be*

over, all my plans and hard work will have been for nothing! I won't get Tai, I won't get to the governor's mansion...

Joe didn't realize he'd slid a nine iron from his golf bag until he bolted through the door with it raised high above his head. Perrelli turned at the last minute, shock registering on his face as Joe brought the club down on his head in a swift arc.

Perrelli fell to the ground in a heap, and died with a stunned expression of disbelief coloring his flaccid features, but Joe wasn't aware of his passing until much later, when his arms finally gave out and he dropped the bent and blood-soaked golf club. By that time, there wasn't enough of a face left to hold an expression, incredulous or otherwise.

He stepped over Perrelli's body, and went inside to wash up. After scouring off the blood that had splattered on his hands and face, and changing his clothes, Joe went into the kitchen and ate a turkey sandwich, washing it down with a beer. Feeling refreshed, he went back outside and used his daddy's tractor to haul Perrelli's body around the side of the house into the backyard.

He laid his last obstacle to rest in the rusty, aluminum shed at the rear of the yard. Perrelli's cruiser involved a little more effort to hide than his body. It took a short drive to the deep, still pond that bordered his daddy's land, where Joe wedged a crowbar against the gas pedal, shoved the Expedition into drive, and jumped out. He watched the truck roll forward into the murky water, and waited until it sank below the surface of the pond. Satisfied the truck was safely hidden, he walked home and ate another turkey sandwich, drank another beer, finally drifting off into a deep, untroubled sleep.

Waiting for dusk to fall the next day was the hardest task of all, in Joe's opinion. He spent most of it lying in bed, naked, his fist working his dick as he daydreamed about Tai and everything he was going to do to her. By the time the sun finally set, his sheets were sticky and stiff with his come. Still, the minutes in between his orgasms dragged by, filled with last minute checks of his equipment, scans of the weather forecast, which was calling for an early snowfall by midnight, and watching the hands of the clock.

He forced himself to eat another sandwich before collecting the duffel bag holding his equipment and getting into his truck. Dressed in black from his boots to his jeans, long-sleeved T-shirt, and overcoat, he imagined he looked very much like a spy, like Tom Cruise in those *Mission Impossible* movies. He felt a trill of excitement as he left town and began to follow the long, twisting road up into the mountains.

His plan was simple. He would pull off the road well out of sight of the guard gate at the entrance, use the tools in his duffle bag to cut the barbed wire, and scale the outer fence. Picking his way through the heavily forested mountainside toward the electrified fence would be treacherous and slow going, but Joe was born and bred in that part of the state, and used to the rough country. He'd gone on enough hunts with his daddy to be fully capable of making it through the dense underbrush and steep ground.

With the power shut off to the electric fence, Joe need only use the wire cutters to snip the cables, and cut a hole large enough in the chain link to slip through. After that, it would be a simple matter of continuing down to the valley where the ranch house lay.

He'd paid very close attention while he was in Tai's room during his previous visit to the ranch, and knew he could reach it by scaling the large oak tree growing next to the house. It was only a couple of feet from the sturdy limbs of the massive tree to the lower roof that extended over the back sundeck just below her window.

He'd spent an entire day scouting the area near between the road and Shifting Sands' property line. There'd been a problem, a drifter. Joe had panicked, not sure if he'd been spotted, and he'd shot the kid. The incident had unnerved Joe, and he'd fled, but he hadn't caught wind of any reports in town of a stranger shot on the mountain, and figured the guy had either moved on, or crawled under a bush somewhere and died. Either way, Joe was in the clear.

With snow in the forecast, the night was sure to be cold. It was probable that Tai's window would be closed, but he was banking on it not being locked. Not many people locked the windows on the second floors of their homes, particularly out in the boonies, on a piece of property surrounded by two fences. He'd brought a glasscutter in case, but doubted he'd need to use it.

Joe's mind turned his plan over and over, as he negotiated the road up to the ranch. By the time he reached the area he'd already picked out as his turn-off, he knew it was foolproof. He threw the truck into four-wheel drive and pulled off the highway, barreling over the thick brush until the trees thickened and he could go no further.

The truck lay well beyond the road -- no one traveling the lonely stretch of highway tonight would see it.

The first fence proved just as easily managed as Joe thought it would be, and he scaled it without any trouble. Using a low-watt flashlight, he began the tedious task of picking his way down the mountainside. He fell twice, once skidding on his backside for several yards before finding his footing again. It was nearing midnight before he reached the second fence. The temperature had dropped considerably; he could smell snow in the air. He tossed a stick at the fence, just to be certain Wells and Greene had complied with the order. There was no spark, no hum, nothing to indicate the fence was electrified.

Summoning his courage, he placed a gloved hand on the chain link, and breathed a long, shaky sigh of relief when he wasn't fried. He worked quickly, digging out his wire cutters, snipping the cables and links, until he was able to peel open a section large enough for him to slip through to the other side.

By one o'clock, Joe arrived at the dark ranch house. Fat snowflakes were beginning to fall, adding a dreamy, fairytale-like quality to the night. He didn't stop to admire the Courier and Ives beauty of the valley; instead, he quickly made his way behind the house

and climbed the old, towering oak. One of the lower branches, thick and easily able to hold his weight, provided his means to the roof.

He peered through the window, squinting. He could make out the shape of a body lying on the bed. *Tai, I'm here*, he thought, slipping his cold-numbed fingers under the pane. It slid up easily and noiselessly, and he slipped into the warmth of her room.

Tai's scent hit him, making him instantly hard. If he wasn't so sure the noise would wake the other residents of the house, he would have fucked her there, in her bed, under her virginal white comforter. *No, there'll be plenty of time for that later. First things first*, he thought, silently unzipping his duffle. His fingers closed around the hypodermic needle he'd filled earlier.

One good thing about his daddy's failed fight with cancer had been the need for Joe to learn to administer pain medication. He'd kept the syringes, as well as the drugs. They'd come in handy over the years when he'd had to subdue women.

He shook his head to clear it of the ugly, unwanted memories. Those other women had asked for it. They'd teased him, flaunted themselves at him, but backed off when he'd reciprocated. They'd left him no choice.

Tai was different. Yes, she was a tease, but she loved him. She'd change for Joe, become devoted to him. He would only have to use the needle on her this one time. Once she was safely away from the perverts at the ranch, she'd be so grateful to Joe that he wouldn't have to hurt her.

Sinking to his knees next to her bed, he expertly slid the needle into the muscle of her thigh. Tai groaned, her eyes fluttering in her sleep at the sudden stab of pain, but by the time it registered in her brain and woke her, it was too late, just as Joe knew it would be. Her eyes widened for a moment and she drew in a deep breath as if to scream, but then her eyelids fluttered and slowly closed again. All she managed was a long, soft sigh.

Joe would have liked to sit there forever, gently stroking her silky hair, watching her sleep, but it was snowing heavier outside, and they had miles to go before he could rest.

Aside from his flashlight, which he stuck inside his coat pocket, Joe would have no further need for his tools. He ignored his duffle bag, scooping Tai's lithe body into his arms, comforter and all.

Tai's added weight would make the way back more difficult once he reached the forested hillside, but getting out of the house would be far easier, since he planned on going out the front door.

Carefully, he crept into the hallway. There were no sounds, no lights, no indication that anyone in the house was awake. The stairway was lit by a row of tiny, yellow emergency lights that ran along the baseboard. He descended the stairs as quickly and quietly as he

could, heading for the front door. Shifting Tai's weight, he succeeded in unlocking the deadbolt and pulled the door open, meeting with a gust of cold air.

The frigid air refreshed him, and he moved faster, carrying Tai off the porch and around the side of the house into the yard. The moon hadn't yet been overcome by storm clouds; the falling snow dusted the ground and reflected the weak moonlight. Joe realized he no longer needed his flashlight to see. He retraced his steps back to the spot at the electric fence where he'd come through, then up the side of the mountain to the first fence, and his truck.

He placed Tai in the back of the truck, tucking her comforter around her so that she'd be comfortable, slid behind the wheel, and headed back down the road, his eyes on the slick macadam, but his mind on the young woman who lay in a drugged sleep on the backseat. He wished he could take her home, but knew that wouldn't be smart. Instead, he was taking Tai to his daddy's hunting cabin, high up on the mountain. *She'll like it there*, he thought. *There won't be anyone around to bother us. It'll be the perfect honeymoon.*

Chapter Eighteen

"Mal..."

"We can't stay here forever, Caed," Mal interrupted, looking into Caedes' bottomless black eyes. "I have to go back, at least to let my family know I'm still alive, and make things right between myself and Tai again. After that, when I get back, we can decide where to go from there."

Caedes finally nodded in defeat, and Mal felt inordinately relieved. He didn't really want to leave -- he liked sitting in the warmth of the small fire, talking with Caedes, making love with him during the long hours of the night, but he couldn't ignore his conscience any longer.

Mal reached out and touched the side of Caedes' face reassuringly. He leaned in and kissed Caedes softly, then offered him one last smile, and stood up. He shifted, and trotted out of the cave, through the curtain of falling water. His thoughts were tumbling one after another as he negotiated the rocky terrain of the foothills, wondering what it was about Caedes that was so attractive, so addictive, and marveling at how Caedes made Mal's heart flip-flop every time they touched. What they had together went beyond the mere physical; he knew it, felt it deep inside. How far beyond, and how long it would last were questions he didn't have answers for.

He reached the perimeter fence and shifted again, using his powers to open a gap large enough for him to slip through without frying himself. As he again assumed his horse-form, he happened to glance toward the mountains, and noticed a thin wisp of smoke coming from the woods northwest of the waterfall and cave. *We always have problems with hunters up there during deer season*, he thought. *They always try to short-circuit the fences so they can hunt on our property*. He made a mental note to mention the smoke to his uncles, then dismissed it from his mind as he headed toward the ranch house and Tai.

Mal shifted once more and broke into a gallop when he reached the pastureland, anxious to get to Tai. He wanted to explain the situation, tell her about Caedes. He realized he'd have some apologizing to do; he'd lost his temper with her, said things he wished he could take back when he'd caught her in bed with Taylor. *I was angry, lonely, and jealous. I should've been happy she'd found someone, shifter or not. I wasn't fair to her*. He felt a trill of unease, wondering if she'd accept his apology after the horrible things he'd said to her. *I'll beg if I have to*, he thought. *I can't leave with Caedes until I know she forgives me*.

If she feels for Taylor even half of what I feel for Caedes, I can understand why she was so pissed at me, Mal thought as he gathered his legs beneath him and jumped the last fence into the wide courtyard in front of the house. *Tai, I've been an idiot. I'm so sorry. I was wrong about you and Taylor -- I understand that now*, he thought, rehearsing his speech in his head. *Oh, yeah, and you can forget about Uncle Jax wanting to kill Taylor. Once he gets a load of my boyfriend, Taylor's going to look like a prince to him*.

It was late, and there were no lights shining in any of the windows. Everyone must be asleep, he thought, grateful he wouldn't have to face his parents or uncles yet. The door was open, which was odd. *Maybe Taylor forgot to close it*, he thought. *I'll have to warn Tai -- it'd be a dead giveaway to Uncle Jax, if he saw it.*

He crept up the stairs to the second floor landing, pausing in front of Tai's door. He rapped softly on it and turned the knob, pushing it open. It was dark inside Tai's room, and his eye was caught by movement at the window. Stepping closer, he saw the sash was up and the curtains were fluttering in the cold breeze. He shut the window, the curtains stilling immediately, and turned toward the bed.

"Tai? Tai, it's me, Mal. Tai? Come on, Tai, talk to me. It's important," he whispered, approaching the bed. He squinted, trying to make out Tai's form under the rumpled covers. Reaching for the nightstand, he flicked on the lamp. "I'm really sorry about how I behaved before--"

The bed was empty. The covers were thrown back, pillow indented with the shape of Tai's head, but she was nowhere to be seen. Mal's instincts kicked in, his nerves beginning to prickle with wariness edged with worry. Had she gone to Taylor's bed tonight? *No*, he immediately answered himself. Taylor was new, and a human to boot. Uncle Jax would've put him in the bunkhouse. There was no way Tai could sleep with him there without an audience. Maybe they'd gone somewhere else, like to the barn. It was too cold for them to be sleeping outside in the pasture.

Something didn't smell right, though.

The window was open when he'd come in. Tai refused to sneak out that way when they'd been children -- she was afraid of heights. There was no reason to believe she'd start now, Taylor or no Taylor. Tai's fear of heights was crippling for her.

Something's wrong. Really wrong, he thought. He turned on the overhead light, looking around the room, trying to piece the puzzle together. There was a duffle bag on the floor. He didn't recognize it as Tai's, and when he peeked inside it, he saw wire cutters and other tools. What was it doing in there? Was it Taylor's? Could be... he knew Taylor did odd jobs around the ranch, but it seemed odd he'd bring them into Tai's room.

Something crunched under his bare foot; he felt a sharp pain slice his instep. Looking down, he saw the shattered remains of a plastic hypodermic needle on the carpet, splattered with red drops of his blood.

The hair on the back of his neck and his arms stood up as fear washed over him. Tai didn't touch drugs -- she refused to take Tylenol even when monthly cramps wracked her badly enough to keep her in bed. It wasn't hers; he was sure of it.

Was it Taylor's? A surge of anger threatened to rise, but as he picked up the needle and sniffed it, he caught a scent that iced his blood.

It wasn't Taylor Mal smelled -- it was a stranger's scent coating the needle.

"Tai!" Mal yelled, banging the door open and racing out into the hall. "Mom! Dad! Tai's gone!" He drummed furiously on the door to his parent's bedroom, until he heard his father's voice groggily call back. "Get up! Something's happened to Tai!"

Jax and Dakota's room was next. Mal pounded on the door hard enough to rattle it in the jamb. "Uncle Jax! Help! Tai's gone!"

Lights flicked on all over the house as people woke to Mal's frantic screams. Within moments, Mal found himself surrounded by his parents, Jax and Dakota. Aiden and Ghost appeared at the far end of the hall, looking sleepy and confused.

"Mal, what the hell is going on? What's all the yelling about?" Oscar asked him, putting a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Where the hell have you been?"

"She's gone, Dad. Tai -- she's not in her room!" Mal explained. He could barely hear over the loud thumping of blood in his ears, and he was covered in a cold sweat. Tai was in trouble; he felt it in his bones.

"What do you mean, gone?" Jax demanded.

Mal held out the needle he'd found. Jax took it from him, sniffed it once, and howled. He pushed past Mal, running into Tai's room. By the time the rest of them caught up, he was standing over her bed, sniffing the air.

"Oh, my God... Oscar? What's happened?" Deidre gasped, clutching her husband's arm. "Where is she?"

Mal threw the hypodermic needle against the wall in a fury. "I think someone took her! Where's Taylor? How much do we know about him? It's not his scent on the needle, but would he do anything to hurt her?"

"Taylor? No, never. They can't stand each other," Dakota said, shaking his head. "He won't give her the time of day."

"Newsflash, Uncle Dakota -- he's given her a lot more than just the time," Mal said, frowning. "They're sleeping together."

"What?" Deidre and Oscar cried together, staring wide-eyed at Mal. Too late, he realized he'd given away Tai's secret romance with Taylor. Not that it mattered now -- all that did was that they find Tai, and find her quickly, before she was hurt.

Dakota held up a hand, his eyes watching Jax continue to sniff the air. "Tai is an adult, and whatever's happened between them is their business, not ours. Taylor is a good man, though. He wouldn't hurt Tai."

"I smell Taylor in here, but the scent is faint, several days old," Jax said. Mal watched him follow an invisible olfactory trail from the bed to the window. "Someone came in through window, and took her from her bed. I can smell the fucking drugs -- he must have injected her while she was asleep. She was taken out of the door," Jax said. They all followed him out of the bedroom into the hall, down the stairs, and to the front door. "The bastard took her right out of our own fucking front door!"

There was a growl in Jax's voice that sent a chill tripping up Mal's spine. He couldn't remember ever seeing Jax look so angry, and suddenly knew why Jax was the alpha of the ranch. He looked as if he could and would tear apart anyone or anything that stood between him and Tai.

"Who would do such a thing? Are you sure about Taylor, Dakota?" Oscar asked, sounding desperate.

"It wasn't Taylor," Jax said, baring his teeth. "I know the scent of the man who took her. Joe Wheaton, the property tax collector who was here a couple of weeks ago."

"*Wheaton?*" Dakota repeated, looking puzzled. "Are you sure? Why would Wheaton do something like this?"

"I told you I smelled something wrong about him, Dakota," Jax said, turning to stare out of the open front door into the dark. "You told me I was exaggerating."

"Now's not the time to say 'I told you so,'" Dakota answered, although he looked pale and stricken.

"Get dressed. We're going after them," Jax said, brushing past Mal toward the staircase. He took the steps two at a time, followed by everyone else. "His house is in town. Maybe he took her there. If not, maybe we can find a clue as to where he might have taken her."

"I'll call the sheriff, and let him know to meet us there," Ghost said, running into his room. Aiden followed closely on his heels.

Seeing Aiden reminded Mal of Caedes, waiting in the cave. "Uncle Dakota, there something I need to talk to you about--"

"Huh? It's gonna have to wait, Mal," Dakota said, putting up a hand. "This is more important than anything else. We have to find Tai before that bastard hurts her!"

Jax reappeared, naked, carrying a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that he shoved at Dakota. He was bristling as he waited for Dakota, Oscar, and Deidre to dress and rejoin him and Mal at the front door.

Without saying another word, Jax shifted, his enormous gray-and-black timber wolf's wet nose testing the air. Ghost and Aiden joined them just as Jax jumped off the porch, sniffed the air once or twice more, and loped off behind the house.

"I told the Sheriff's Office what was going on. The deputies are all out -- seems the sheriff is missing, but the dispatcher said to come in and file a missing person's report." Aiden said.

"Fuck that. We're not wasting any time on paperwork!" Oscar roared. "That's my little girl out there!"

"Oscar, try to calm down. You won't do anybody any good if you lose it. Ghost? Aiden? Why don't you boys go wake up Taylor, and see what he knows, just to be on the safe side," Dakota said as they followed Jax to the rear of the property.

Mal stood on the front porch, feeling miserably torn. His loyalty lay in following the others to find Tai, but something deep inside him pulled him in the other direction, toward the cave and Caedes. He was still standing on the porch trying to decide which path to follow when Ghost, Aiden, and now Taylor and the rest of the hired hands from the bunkhouse ran past him toward the backyard. None spared him a glance. A minute ticked by, then two. Shouts from his family echoed through the quiet valley, sounding further and further away -- the trail was leading them to the electrified fence and beyond.

He'd just made up his mind to follow the others when moonlight glinted off something large and moving fast across the open pasture in front of the house, catching his eye. He tensed, ready to shift as the bipedal figure drew inexorably nearer.

A reptilian head, as ugly as sin itself, loomed out of the darkness. Green-yellow eyes slit with elongated black pupils blinked as Caedes slowed to a stop just outside of the porch light's reach. He faltered a step, then seemed to recover.

"What are you doing here?" Mal hissed, bounding down the steps to where Caedes stood, nervously shifting his weight from one three-toed foot to the other. "Are you crazy? Your wounds haven't completely healed yet, and if my uncles see you, it won't matter because you'll be dead!" He watched the velociraptor form melt away, replaced by Caedes' human body. That he was winded and in pain was immediately apparent.

"You needed me," Caedes wheezed, stumbling again.

Mal caught Caedes just before he fell. "How did you know?"

"Just did. Felt it in my bones, way down deep."

Mal didn't argue, or take the time to dwell on the implications. His hand lifted, though, brushing his knuckles gently against Caedes' cheek. "My sister was kidnapped. We think one of the locals has her -- a guy named Wheaton. Everyone's gone up toward the main road; we think he may have taken her into town."

"I'll help look for her."

"No, you'll go right back to the cave and wait for me. You're in no condition for a manhunt."

A deep growl rolled in Caedes' chest. "I'm fine. I told you, I heal fast. I'm not leaving you." It was true enough; Mal could see him growing stronger as he caught his breath, his body standing taller, the pain in his eyes easing.

"My family will kill you, Caedes. I need time to make them understand about you first, especially Uncle Jax! I can't worry about my sister and you, both. It's too much," Mal groaned. He froze, hearing footsteps. "They're coming back! Quick, get to the storage shed!"

Mal caught Caedes' arm and dragged him at a run toward the shed. He breathed a slight sigh of relief when they stepped into the darkness of the small hut just as the Jax, Dakota, and the rest rounded the corner of the ranch house. Mal eased the door open a crack to watch; he could hear them clearly as they discussed what they'd found.

"It was a definitely a vehicle that made that mess up there," Dakota said. The group stood in a loose circle just in front of the house. "The damage was new, and Wheaton's scent is all over it. I could smell Tai there, too. The bastard put her in his truck. Do you think he took her to his house in town?"

"Be stupid if he did. He must know it's the first place we'd look," Oscar said. His arms were around Deidre, whose soft cries tore at Mal's heart.

"I think he's acting alone, though. I didn't smell anyone else." Jax asked, looking from face to face. "But I didn't smell blood, either. Tai's not hurt at least."

"Thank God for that, but for how long? What's he taken her for?" Ghost asked.

Deidre moaned, a horrible, empty sound that matched the agony Mal felt. "What do you think he took her for? She's young, and beautiful... oh, God, Oscar! That bastard has my baby!"

"We'll find her," Oscar said, sounding determined, although his face was etched with the same pain as Deidre's.

"Why are we still standing here talking about it? We need to go get her!" Taylor cried. Mal could smell his rage and fear even across the distance to the small shed. Human or not, Taylor loved Tai, and his worth hitched up a notch in Mal's book.

"We don't know where he took her, Taylor," Jax growled. "Remember?"

"Taylor's right, Jax. We can't just stand here! I think we should start at Wheaton's house. If they're not there, maybe there'll be a clue as to where he *did* take her," Dakota's deep rumble rolled across the yard, always the calming voice of reason.

Jax suddenly froze, sniffing the air. "I smell something weird. I can't place it, but it smells familiar."

Mal froze, his fingers tightening on Caedes' arm.

"Forget it, Jax. We've already been through this area," Oscar said, "I agree with Dakota and Taylor. Let's head into town."

Mal melted into the darkness of the shed, pushing Caedes behind him as Jax's green eyes looked in their direction. Then Dakota was shoving clothing at Jax, dragging him toward their truck, and Mal relaxed.

Aiden spoke next. "I'll follow you from the air. See if I can spot anything from up above." He stripped and shifted; his huge golden eagle took wing, circling above their heads.

Mal watched as they split up, piling into cars and trucks. Motors revved, tires spinning in the gravel as the vehicles pulled out, following the path out of the complex, up toward the main road. He turned to Caedes as soon as they were out of sight. "You stay put. I've got to go find my sister."

A strong arm held him back. "Mal, he was smart enough to snatch her out from under your family's noses."

"Huh?"

Caedes' black eyes were invisible in the dark, but Mal felt them burning into him. "Whoever he is, he's not an idiot. He knew the house, knew where to find her. He got in and out without waking anyone. I doubt if he's going to be stupid enough to take her back to his house, Mal. It's the first place anyone would look."

"Maybe you're right, but I don't know where else to start looking. I have to find her, Caedes!"

"Listen to me, Mal. I smelled wood smoke on the way here. Is there a cabin or something nearby? It would make sense for him to take her somewhere close, but as far from his

house, the town, and the ranch as possible. Somewhere no one could hear her, or notice anything suspicious."

Understanding suddenly bloomed in Mal's brain like a supernova. "I smelled smoke, too. It was coming from an old hunting cabin up on the mountain, outside of our property line. Jax tried to buy the land years ago, but the owner refused to sell. Used to burn my uncles' britches that humans were up there during hunting season, so close to the ranch."

"We'll get there faster if I ride you."

"Oh, hell no! You're still hurt. You're staying here."

"I'm fine, and you're not leaving without me again. Besides, you need me. No offense, but you're a *horse*, Mal. You have hooves -- you can kick and bite, but I'm a killing machine. I'm fast, and I'm fucking *lethal*." There was no pride, no boasting in Caedes' voice; he was just stating facts.

Mal paused, remembering Caedes' mouthful of wicked teeth and dagger-like claws. He still demurred, afraid to risk Caedes' safety. "I don't know what I'm going to be facing if he's up there with her, Caedes. He may be armed."

"I'm coming, and that's final. Besides, my family owes your family," he whispered. Mal flinched at the sadness in his voice. "It's time to make amends for the sins of my father."

"You're not responsible for what Cain did, Caedes."

"Now's not the time for lectures, Mal. Let's quit talking and start moving, dammit!" Caedes hissed. He shouldered past Mal, and kicked open the shed door, marching out into the yard. "You coming or not?"

Mal swallowed his misgivings, and shifted.

Chapter Nineteen

Mal picked his way through the forested mountainside as quickly as he could, but the way was much slower going than he would have liked. Trees and underbrush were thick; rabbit and fox dens, rocks, roots, and steep inclines made footing treacherous. An hour and a half of precious time was wasted making their way to the area where the cabin was situated.

The smell of wood smoke grew stronger with each step, until at last the cabin came into view. He felt Caedes slip from his back, landing on silent feet next to him. Mal shifted, and the two of them crouched behind a screen of bushes, looking at the ramshackle, tin-roofed cabin. A single plume of black smoke drifted lazily from a stovepipe chimney.

It was small, probably only one room, typical of the rough, log-constructed hunting cabins in the area. Flickering light, no doubt from a hearth, cast the interior with a soft, yellow glow. There would be no amenities -- no bathroom, no electricity, no running water. Mal couldn't even hear the whine of a generator. It was strictly bare bones, used only for minimal shelter during the hunting season -- or *any* season, if the owners were poachers. There was also only one-way in and out -- the front door, unless one counted the single small window cut into the left-hand wall. .

It was obvious at first glance that, although the cabin hadn't been used much in recent years, it was never completely abandoned. The area reeked of rancid garbage and neglect, and smelled strongly of human spoor.

Underlying it all was another scent, one Mal knew as well as he did his own.

"She's in there," Mal whispered. "I can smell her. The bastard has her inside!" Only Caedes' strong hand on his arm jerking him back kept Mal from charging blindly up to the cabin, and kicking the door in.

"Wait!" Caedes hissed. "You go crashing in there and you could be shot before you step over the threshold. We don't know if the asshole's armed -- you said so yourself. We need to be smart, take this slow. Come on... there's a window. Maybe we can see what's going on. Keep your head down, try not to make any noise, and follow me."

Mal's pride prickled and he yanked his arm away from Caedes' hand. "She's *my* sister. I'm not a fucking kid. I know what I'm doing."

Caedes growled at him. His teeth and eyes gleamed in the darkness. "You're an herbivore, Mal. I'm a fucking predator! If there was one thing Gar trained me to do well, it's to hunt. Now, do you want to get your sister out of there alive without getting us dead, or not?"

Mal fought with himself, staring at Caedes, hating that he knew Caedes was right. He had no experience whatsoever in hunting. He'd never killed anything in his entire life, not even in self-defense. He'd never had reason to before. "Okay," he finally said, nodding.

"You go first." He cupped Caedes' chin, stopping him for a moment, staring into his dark eyes. "Don't get dead on me, okay?"

A low, disturbing chuckle rumbled in Caedes' chest, raising a fresh wave of gooseflesh over Mal's already chilled skin. "It's the human you need to worry about, Mal, not me." Then he turned toward the cabin, bending low, keeping to the shadows.

Mal followed, his heart hammering against his breastbone, sweating although he was naked, and it was cold. Fat, heavy snowflakes began to sift down, feeling like icy pinpricks on his skin.

Caedes reached the window first. It was cracked open an inch, and from the expression on his face, Mal knew whatever he saw and heard wasn't good. He swallowed hard and held his breath as he shouldered Caedes out of the way to look through the dusty, murky glass.

The room was a jumble of junk -- old boxes, camping gear, and empty tin cans piled in haphazard stacks. The only furnishings were a tiny butcher-block table, and a cot. A small fire blazed in the hearth, the source of the smoke and the only light source in the cabin. A man, balding, dressed in black, fumbled with something near the fireplace. The light of the flames glinted off the metal blade of a knife.

The cot was set next to a wall, and there was a slender, feminine shape lying on the thin, bare mattress. Tai lay still, her eyes wide. A piece of wadded white cloth filled her mouth, and clothesline bound her hands behind her back. Her knees were bent, and her ankles tied together. Another long piece of rope encircled her throat, and connected the bindings on her wrists and ankles. Mal knew instantly that she couldn't shift, not without breaking her neck.

A mess of broken glass and splintered chairs littered the floor. Tai must've used her powers to hit her attacker with everything she could -- lamps, glassware, chairs. It was as if almost everything not tied down or bolted to the floor was in pieces -- it was just too bad nothing had brought the bastard down. Mal did notice with satisfaction several lacerations and bruises covering the man's face and arms, though. *At least she didn't go quietly -- she got some hits in*, he thought proudly.

"I'm so disappointed in you, Tai. I thought you'd be different from other women. I was wrong, though, wasn't I? I've tried and tried, you know. I longed to find a woman who wasn't filthy, who'd love me and only me." Wheaton was talking, his voice high-pitched, full of hostility and madness. The window was open slightly, and Mal heard him clearly. "You're worse than all of them. You're not only a whore, you're a fucking witch! You know what they say about witches, right? Don't suffer them to live."

Mal's skin crawled at the sound of lunacy in the man's voice, and the almost loving way he examined the blade in his hand before thrusting it inside the hearth, holding it in the flames. "All women lie, from Eve right on down the line. First, there was the woman I found hitchhiking. It was years ago, and I remember it was raining that night, and she

smiled at me when I stopped to pick her up. When I brought her here, I learned the truth about her. She was a whore, just like all of you. I never even learned her name."

He paused, pulling the knife out of the hearth. He held it up, twisting it, frowned, and held it to the licking flames again. "Next I found Sheila, a woman who lived in Jackson. She waited tables in a diner, and she always smiled at me when I stopped in for coffee. I brought her here and learned the truth behind her smile. There were others, too. All whores, every one, even my own mother." The knife flashed in the light again, glowing red from the fiery kiss of the flames. "Church smiles and whore smiles, that's what my daddy always said."

Wheaton stood up with his back to the window. "You're no different. I thought you would be, but you're not. I saw you, teasing me with your smile, your eyes, with your body. Look at you! Even now, you're trying to seduce me, acting all helpless and frightened! I won't fall for it, though. I'm smarter than that. I know a whore when I see one. Witch! You're so soft and beautiful on the outside, but inside, you're rotted and ugly." He took another step closer to the bed, holding up the knife, showing Tai the blade. "I'm going to reveal your true face, Tai, for the world to see. It's hidden under your beauty, but I see it clearly now. Soon, everyone else will, too."

Tai's eyes were enormous; they seemed to fill her entire face. She was clearly terrified. Mal could feel her fear hammering at his soul. He turned from the window, moving quickly toward the corner of the cabin.

"Mal!" Caedes hissed, pulling on his arm. "He's got a gun. I saw it on the table. Don't be stupid! You can't charge in there blind!"

Mal didn't answer. All he could see was Tai's frightened face; all he could hear were Wheaton's horrible words. Tai wasn't the first woman Wheaton had brought to the cabin, and with a flash of insight, Mal knew what he'd done to the others -- and what he planned to do to Tai. Feeling suddenly, violently sick to his stomach, he wrenched his arm away from Caedes and shifted.

Caedes couldn't hope to hold him back in his horse-form. Screaming a shrill challenge, Mal thundered around the corner of the building. One swift kick splintered the front door. His horse-form couldn't fit through the door; he shifted again and charged into the cabin, his eyes focused on Tai. A few steps brought him between her and Wheaton.

A loud pop startled him just before a blindingly sharp pain sliced through him, felling him to his knees. Tai's scream, muffled by the gag, reached him. His head swam with pain, but he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Turning his head, he saw Wheaton standing over him, a revolver dangling in his hand at his side. The smell of gunpowder was choking; smoke coiled from the barrel.

Wheaton's eyes were wild, his lips curled over his teeth, face flushed. Mal realized that whatever tenuous hold on sanity Wheaton might have claimed a moment ago had

snapped. Perhaps it was just the unexpected intrusion into his fantasy, or maybe he'd seen Mal shift from horse to man. Either way, the result was the same.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion after that. Wheaton was yelling something about whores and smiles, his voice sounding distorted and far away, blending with Tai's muted screams. The muzzle of the revolver rose, its barrel looming in front of Mal's eyes like a cavernous, black tunnel. The gun wavered, as if Wheaton were fighting to keep it aimed at Mal. *Tai's trying to get him to drop it*, he thought. He reached out with his powers to aid her, but he was too weak.

Then a roar thundered so loudly it made Mal's ears ring. A flash of greenish-gray flew past him just as the gun went off again; through a hazy fog of pain he glimpsed razor-sharp, white teeth, and heard a shrill scream cut suddenly, chillingly, short. The smell of blood flooded the room, nauseatingly sweet and coppery. A reptilian head lifted and bellowed deafeningly again, its body poised over its prey.

Mal's vision grayed, and his last thought before he slowly slumped face-forward into oblivion was, *Tai, meet Caedes*.

"There's so much blood! Oh, Mal, my poor Mal..."

Tai's voice, rich with grief, reached him through the grayness. He tried to open his eyes, but his lids were too damned heavy, and refused to cooperate.

"Can't you do anything? He said you were a healer!"

Caedes' voice, panic-stricken, begged Tai to help someone. *Help me*, Mal realized. *Heal me. I'm dying*.

"It's too deep! I don't where the damage is -- that's Mal's gift. I need him to tell me what to heal!"

Strong hands slapped his cheeks hard enough to sting, a stern voice pulling him up from the gray ocean he floated in. "Mal? Mal, I know you can hear me. You need to wake up, buddy. Come on, you're stronger than this, Mal! I know you are! Wake the fuck up!"

Caedes is going alpha on me, trying to order me around.. Mal almost found the strength to smile. *Alpha, my ass! When I wake up, I'm going to have to put him in his place. Too tired now, though. Need to nap.*

"Don't you dare die on me, Mal! You have to wake up! You *have* to!"

Tai was screaming at him like when they were kids and he stole her favorite doll away. Then Tai and Caedes yelled at him together, tag-teaming him. Didn't they know how

tired he was? It pissed him off. He dug down deep, found the strength to open his eyes. "Shut up. Tired." He couldn't manage more than a whisper. The pain in his shoulder and chest was unbearable. He felt like he couldn't breathe, and nearly decided it wasn't worth the effort. Then his vision cleared a bit, and he saw the terrified expressions on Tai and Caedes' faces. *Got to hang on. Just a little while longer... for them...*

"Oh, Mal! Thank God! Where are you hurt, Mal? Concentrate! I need to know!" Tai's face, so familiar, so loved, loomed over him.

Caedes' hand, strong but gentle, petted his hair. "Please, Mal. Tell her. What did the bullet do?"

Bullet? Oh, yeah. I've been shot. I remember, now. He tried to concentrate, picturing his wound in his mind. "Pectoralis muscle major and minor. Nicked the subclavian artery. Bullet's lodged in the Teres minor. Nerves torn to hell and back." His eyes rolled from the effort, the grayness seeping back again, his lids fluttering closed.

"Stay with us, Mal," Caedes' voice, an anchor for him to cling to, keeping the grayness at bay.

Mal felt heat flowing into him, warming him, filling his every pore, hotter in his shoulder. Lava hot. Sun hot. Tai's talent touching him, healing him. He knew without needing to see that her hands would be glowing, and throwing off blue sparks. The gray receded and his mind cleared as the pain slowly ebbed.

After a few deep, pain-free breaths, his eyes blinked open, awake and alert. "So...I see you two have met."

Chapter Twenty

Caedes hung back, watching Mal and Tai walk toward the ranch house. He should go, right now. Staying would only cause huge problems for Mal, no matter what Mal said to the contrary. It would be better to leave now. Easier. Safer.

He bit his lip, his body at war with itself. His brain told his feet to move, but his heart kept them firmly planted, refusing to budge an inch.

They'd left Wheaton in the cabin. Neither Mal nor Tai would look at the body, and Caedes knew why. Only a monster would have done the damage he'd done to Wheaton. Only a creature of nightmares, one that shouldn't exist, would've ripped a human being apart like that.

A hideous beast that had no place in this world anymore -- certainly no place in Mal's world.

Him.

Mal stopped and looked back at him. "Caedes?"

He gave a small, half-hearted wave, and turned to leave. *It's better this way, for me, for him.* He tried not to feel how hollow that sounded in his heart. *Nex was right. You're a coward. Weak. You don't deserve him.*

"Caedes, where're you going?" Mal's hand was warm on his arm, pulling at him, forcing him to stop.

"I have to go, Mal." He wouldn't meet Mal's eyes; he couldn't. "It's for the best. Your family will never accept me, especially not after they see the mess I left in the cabin."

"So you're just going to walk out on me? I won't let you, Caedes."

"You don't have a choice, Mal."

"Yes, I do. I can go with you, if you insist on leaving."

"No, you can't do that. You have a home here, family."

Mal's hand planted itself in the middle of Caedes' chest. "I have family here, too." His voice was as tender as his fingers, pulling at Caedes' soul.

To Caedes' shock, Tai appeared and added her hand on top of Mal's. "So do I. You helped save my life, and my brother's, Caedes. That makes you family. Wheaton could have shot you just as easily as he shot Mal. It's only luck that the second bullet just grazed you."

"My family will understand, Caedes. Give them a chance, at least."

Caedes' throat constricted, his eyes burning as tears escaped his control. He wasn't used to such gentleness, such acceptance, and their genuineness overwhelmed him. He met Mal's eyes then, and what he saw shining in them nearly brought him to his knees. He'd never seen it before, not directed at him. Not from Gar, not even from Nex.

Love.

He knew he couldn't walk away from Mal, not even if all the guns in the state were pointed at him, ready to blow him into bite-sized pieces. He'd face Mal's family, for no other reason than because Mal was asking him to stay.

"If I end up as a head on a plaque hanging over your family's fireplace, it's your fault," Caedes said, finding a small smile.

Mal grinned at him, and reached for his hand, threading their fingers together, and he felt a surge of courage he hadn't known he possessed. With Tai at their side, they walked the rest of the way to the ranch house.

It was nearly two hours later before everyone made their way back to the ranch, summoned from their search by Mal's phone call to Oscar. Word spread quickly -- Tai was home, she was safe. Jax never felt so relieved in all his life.

Taylor had driven with Ghost and Aiden; their truck was parked in front of the house when Jax drove up with Dakota, Oscar, and Deidre. When Jax pushed his way inside the house, anxious to see with his own eyes that Tai was safe, he found her in Taylor's arms. He caught sight of Ghost, and nearly laughed, never thinking Ghost could *possibly* look any paler than he usually did, but the man looked near to losing his lunch. Taylor must've driven like a born-again lunatic to get to Tai before anyone else.

He was going to have to have a talk with that boy, and soon, judging from the way he and Tai were staring into one another's eyes.

Oscar and Deidre immediately went to their children, hands touching them, their faces, their shoulders, eyes searching for wounds, making sure they were both okay. Lectures would come later -- for now they were obviously too relieved to find the twins healthy and safe to say much of anything.

It was then Jax noticed the stranger, a slender, dark-haired young man standing hand-in-hand with Mal. Jax sniffed the air, smelling the strange-but-familiar scent he'd caught before they'd left the ranch. He knew that smell, and the memory of it was shrouded in fear, pain, and loathing.

Then he placed it, and time ground to a halt, memories flashing through his head at light-speed of a towering wall of flesh, teeth, and claws rampaging across the Shifting Sands. Of screams, and a nightmarish roar cutting through the night, of blood flowing, and bone-deep sorrow.

Cain.

Jax threw his head back and howled, launching himself across the room at the stranger. He didn't take the time to strip and shift; his outrage at finding an Ultimate Predator, one that stank of Cain's scent, permitted no such luxury. He didn't need to shift -- his wrath was such that he'd rip the stranger to pieces with his bare hands.

Black eyes blinked at him in fear, green and yellow flaring within them as Jax hurled himself toward the stranger with hands outstretched. Before he could wrap his fingers around the stranger's throat, Mal stepped between them, roughly pushing Jax away.

"Uncle Jax! Stop it!" Mal and Tai screamed together. He barely heard them; rage fueled his heart, blood pounding in his ears.

Suddenly, Dakota's strong arms were around him, lifting him away bodily, holding him immobile. Jax struggled, muscles straining, but he couldn't break free. "Do you know who that is? I can smell Cain on him! Dakota, let me fucking go!" His wolf howled again, pushing from under his skin, demanding to be set free to protect his Pack.

"Settle down, Jax!" Dakota's deep voice reached through the red haze of fury, but Jax resisted.

"No! They're back! The Ultimate Predators! I told you, warned you all they'd be back! Mal, Tai! Get away from him!" Jax renewed his struggles against Dakota's embrace. He managed to drag them forward a couple of steps, despite Dakota's formidable strength and considerable weight. He saw Oscar, Ghost, and Aiden step closer, although whether they were ready to help Dakota restrain him, or help him break free, was unclear.

"Listen to me, Uncle Jax! He's a friend, not the enemy! He saved Tai and me!" Mal stood between Jax and the stranger, refusing to back down. Tai moved to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Mal, the twins forming a living, protective barrier between them. Jax looked from one face to the other, not understanding, not comprehending. This stranger was the enemy! Why were the twins helping him?

"Jax, calm the fuck down!" Dakota roared, giving him a shake. Dakota's roughness finally breached through Jax's blind rage, and he stilled, breathing hard, shaking in Dakota's arms. "Listen to what they have to say."

"Wheaton kidnapped me," Tai said. She trembled, and her eyes filled with tears. "It was awful -- he was crazy, Uncle Jax. He was going to kill me."

Jax watched Taylor step up, taking Tai into his arms. She buried her face in the crook of his neck as Mal took up the thread of the story.

"I had a fight with Tai -- over Taylor," Mal said, looking over at the couple. "Sorry, man. I don't know what got into me -- jealousy, I guess. Tai, I'm really sorry for everything I said that night."

Tai's answered with a small smile and a forgiving nod. Mal returned the smile but immediately turned his attention back to Jax. "I left the ranch that night, and met Caedes on the road. His brother had tried to kill him. Caedes was injured, and I... something wouldn't let me leave him there to die. I brought him to the cave by the waterfall, took care of him as he healed."

"What cave?" Dakota asked, beating Jax to the punch.

"We never told you about it, but Tai and I used to go there a lot as kids. It's a small cave, near the waterfall just outside the eastern perimeter fence," Mal said.

"You went outside the perimeter? How many times did we tell you to stay inside the fences!" Jax yelled.

"Jax! Knock it off and listen!" Dakota admonished. Jax growled up at him, but quieted again.

"We were there for a few days, until we needed supplies. Plus," Mal said, looking at Tai again, "I wanted to make things right with Tai. I left Caedes there, and came back. That's when I discovered Tai was missing.

"Caedes didn't stay put like I'd asked him to, though. He followed me, even though he was still hurting, and it's a good thing he did. Without him, I never would've thought to look for Tai in the old hunting cabin up on the mountain. We found Wheaton there, and Tai. I saw them and lost my head, went running inside the cabin like an idiot, and was shot. It was bad, Uncle Jax, *really* bad. Wheaton would've killed Tai if we hadn't found them when we did, and he almost *did* kill me. If it wasn't for Caedes..." Mal's voice trailed off, and he turned toward Caedes as if unable to continue, but the full weight of his emotions shone in his eyes.

"What did he do?" Dakota asked. Jax remained silent, waiting to hear the answer.

"I killed him." Caedes' voice was tremulous, but courageous. "Wheaton would've killed all of us if I hadn't gotten him first." He stepped out from behind Mal, facing Jax and the rest. His chin tilted up, his face stoic. "You're right, sir. You *can* smell Cain on me -- he was my father."

"Will you let me go now, Dakota? You heard him -- he's Cain's son! Are you going to stand there and let him..."

"Let him do what? The boy hasn't done anything but *help*, Jax. Yeah, he's Cain's son... what difference does that make? Our fathers were human, and they tried to kill us both when we first shifted. Does that mean we're like them? You can't blame the boy for the sins of his father."

Dakota, the goddamn voice of reason. Damn him for making sense, as usual. "What if he's not alone? What if the Ultimate Predators follow him here?"

"I'm alone, sir. The Ultimate Predators no longer exist. Gar said you killed them all, but I believe they just disbanded after Cain was killed. There were only three of us left, that I ever met. Gar attacked Nex, my brother, and Nex killed him. Then, shortly after, Nex attacked me and he died in the fight." There was grief in his voice, Jax realized. Ultimate Predator or not, Caedes had obviously loved his brother, just as Mal loved Tai.

"It was self defense," Mal said. Jax noticed his arm slip around Caedes' waist, saw the look that passed between them, and wondered about their relationship. There was more there than mere friendship. "Caedes was fed a lot of lies by Cain's former lieutenant, Gar, while he was growing up. He didn't believe them, Uncle Jax. He wanted to help find Tai, to make amends for what his father did to us."

"I'm not my father, sir, but I can understand why you'd hate me for being his son. I'm going to leave, and all I ask is that you let me do it in one piece," Caedes said softly.

"You're *not* leaving. You're not going anywhere without me!" Mal growled. He released Caedes, turning to face Jax fully. Caedes looked away, as if unable to stand up to the fierceness in Mal's glare.

There was possessiveness in Mal's voice that rang familiar with Jax -- it was the same as he often heard in his own voice when speaking about Dakota. *Oh, hell no*, he thought, closing his eyes and sighing deeply. The last vestiges of his anger bled out of him, and he wriggled one arm free from Dakota's hold, thrusting his fingers through his hair in frustration. The twins were going to be the death of him, pure and simple. Leave it to Mal to fall in love with the son of Jax's most hated enemy, and Tai to take a human as her mate.

Why couldn't they just have remained children forever? Everything would've been so much simpler if that was the case. But no, they just *had* to go and grow up.

"I know what you're thinking," Dakota rumbled in his ear. "They all have to grow up sometime, Jax. All we can do is keep our fingers crossed, let them make their own choices, and hope they'll be happy."

"This is going to cost you big time, later," Jax hissed through gritted teeth, twisting his head to look at Dakota. "I fully plan on taking all of this out of your big, hairy hide." He ignored the twinkle in Dakota's eyes and the small smile on his lover's lips, turning his

attention back to the kids. He pointed a finger at Taylor and Tai. "Okay. I'm the alpha of this Pack, and I'm only going to say this once, so listen up. Taylor, if you *ever* hurt Tai, I'll have you stuffed and mounted. Got it?"

Taylor smiled, but his eyes were only for Tai. Her grin lit the room, and Jax had to bite back a smile of his own, forcing his expression to remain grim and forbidding. "And you," he said, turning to glare at Caedes. "What do you shift into, anyway? Please tell me I don't need to worry about you stepping on somebody and squishing them."

Caedes cocked his head, looking dumbfounded; exchanging a confused look with Mal. Jax rolled his eyes at their denseness. "Uh, no. I'm a velociraptor. I'm really not much bigger than I am now."

"And I can trust you not to go Jurassic on Mal for... I don't, know... eating the last Pop Tart or using your toothbrush?"

"You can trust me, sir."

"Fine. Then the same thing goes for you. You hurt Mal, and I'll have a new set of luggage sewn out of your hide. Got it?"

"Y-yes, sir," Caedes replied, astonishment coloring his features. A tentative smile tilted his lips as he looked to Mal again, as if he couldn't believe what Jax was saying. "I... can stay?"

"It's either that or keep Mal hogtied for the rest of his life so he doesn't try to follow you," Jax said sarcastically. "His parents wouldn't like that, and neither would Tai or Dakota, and I don't particularly want to spend the rest of my years listening to them all bitch at me."

"Thank you, sir! You won't regret it, I swear!" Caedes said. Jax smirked at the wetness shining in both his eyes and Mal's as they fell into one another's arms.

"Hey, now, there'll be none of that!" Jax cried when it became apparent they were about to kiss. "My vision is bad enough -- I don't want to go completely blind."

Dakota's laughed and his arms squeezed around Jax. His voice was like silk in Jax's ear as he whispered, "How about you and me heading upstairs, and letting them talk? Oscar and Deidre probably have a lecture all ready for them, and don't I seem to remember you talking about taking something out of my hide...?"

Jax could no longer hold back a smile as his body hardened in response to Dakota's invitation. He looked back at the twins, his eyes shifting from Taylor to Caedes. "Welcome to the Pack. Don't make me have to kill you."

He took Dakota's hand, leading him up the stairs, ignoring the laughter that followed

them every step of the way. He'd deal with the twins, Wheaton, and the fall-out from the kidnapping tomorrow, after his mind had a chance to wrap around the changes to his Pack. After he had time to think things through. For now, he was bone-tired, emotionally exhausted, and all he could think about was how fast he could get Dakota up to their room and naked.

For now, that was enough.

Chapter Twenty-One

Later that night, the house was full of the joyful noise of quiet loving. Creaks and thumps were heard from almost every room; low moans and stifled grunts hummed in the air. A near tragedy had been avoided, and it seemed everyone was celebrating by loving their partners.

Jax stilled for a moment, hip-deep inside Dakota, cocking his head as an especially loud yelp came from somewhere down the hall. He couldn't decide to whom it belonged -- it was high-pitched enough to be female but hoarse enough to be male -- then realized he didn't really want to know. He turned his attention back to Dakota, who was looking at him with an expectant, puzzled look.

"Think that was Taylor and Tai--" Dakota began, but Jax cut him off.

"Shut up! I don't want to know. As far as I'm concerned, the twins are curled up in bed with a good book."

"I doubt they're reading, Jax. Not unless Taylor and Caedes got funky with a Sharpie," Dakota said, chuckling.

Jax withdrew and slammed back in, and Dakota's giggle lowered into a needful moan. "Not funny. This is why I never wanted them to grow up."

"They did, though."

"I know it. I'm not happy about it, either."

Dakota laughed again, and then gave Jax a show of his still-considerable strength by grabbing Jax's shoulders and rolling them both over. Dakota straddled Jax's thighs, sliding himself down onto Jax's cock. "Can't have you not being happy, Jax. Please, allow me to give you something else to think about," he said as he began to ride Jax.

Jax closed his eyes, losing himself in the feeling. "Lordy, nothing feels better than your fine ass, especially when all I have to do is lie here and enjoy it."

"I aim to please."

"Pleasing me is what you do best. Oh, man... faster, hon. Ride me." Jax moaned, bending his knees, planting his feet into the mattress. He pumped his hips up to meet Dakota halfway. "Oh, sweet fuck!"

"Jax, touch me!"

Jax's fingers instinctively curled around Dakota's length, jerking him off, wanting to see him come, to hear his name on Dakota's tongue. He didn't have long to wait. A few

minutes of hard pulling was all it took before he saw that familiar look gleaming in Dakota's eyes, the one that told Jax he was going to, he was coming, now, right now. Liquid heat boiled over, running in little rivulets between Jax's fingers, the smell of him, the scent of sex and male and *Dakota*, flooding his senses.

Still slick with come, Jax's hands gripped Dakota's hips, stilling him. He pumped upwards into the silken heat of Dakota's body, once, twice, riding his own release to a height that made his teeth grit against the pure pleasure of it. It seemed to go on for a good, long while, until finally he floated back into himself and found Dakota looking at him all dreamy-eyed and sappy.

He loved it when Dakota got dreamy-eyed and sappy. It made Jax feel all cocky and conceited, as if he'd done something incredible, unbelievable. It made him want to howl, and he gave in to the urge, throwing his head back and setting free the cry that had been building inside of him since the moment they'd learned Tai was safe, eerie and exhilarating, relieved and joyful, all at the same time.

Dakota laughed, slapping a hand over his mouth. "Lord, Jax! Do you want to wake up the whole house?"

"They're not sleeping. They're *reading*, remember? That'll just let 'em know how good *our* book is."

"Our book, huh? Wasn't a very *long* book. More like a short story, if you ask me. We were done in less than twenty minutes! We must be getting old, Jax."

Jax chuckled. "Bullshit. Oh, this time might have been short, but it was pretty damn amazing. Don't worry... we've got the whole fucking library to go through yet, and plenty of time to do in."

"You sure you're up to it, old man?"

"Just let me grab my reading glasses," Jax said, laughing. "We can teach those kids a thing or two about great literature."

"I hear that," Dakota said, stretching out next to him. He cocked his head for a minute when a loud *thump* echoed in the house. "I heard *that*, too. Lord, its sounds like somebody put their headboard through the wall."

Jax clamped his hand over Dakota's mouth. "I am *not* listening, and neither are you. I don't hear a blessed thing, do you?"

Dakota shook his head, his eyes twinkling.

"Good. Now, help me find something I can stuff inside my ears so I can get some sleep."

Taylor groaned and Tai laughed at loud as the howl undulated in the air. "Do they do that every night? Because if they do, Tai, we really need to think about getting our own place. I cannot live with the picture of your uncles doing the horizontal hula in my head."

"They love each other, just like us," Tai admonished, shaking her finger at him.

"They're *old*," Taylor said, wrinkling his nose. "They must look like two sweaty raisins stuck together. Ew."

"Taylor!" Tai cried, although she was giggling. "That's awful!"

"I know! It *is* awful, horrible in fact, and it's right on the other side of that wall -- which is why I said we need to get our own house." He laughed and put up his arms to defend himself as Tai tried to whack him with a pillow.

He leaned up over Tai, and his grin gentled into a tender smile. "I love you, you know. I don't remember if I've said it lately."

Tai's answering smile looked soft and dreamy, reflecting what he felt in his heart. "I love you, too, and no, you haven't said it lately -- at least, not in the last sixty minutes."

"Ah, well that's because I was too busy ravishing you for most of that time. A man can't be expected to think rationally enough to form words when he's making love with a goddess."

"Oh, so I'm a goddess, now, am I? That's a step up. Before you said I was an angel."

"You are. You're both," he said, letting his knuckles brush her cheek. "You're everything to me, Tai."

She answered with a sigh, and her soft lips touching his. Then all thoughts of goddesses, angels, and raisins were forgotten as they lost themselves in each other's bodies again. Even the springs of their mattress seemed to be shouting their love to the world.

Mal laid back, drops of sweat glinting like diamonds on his skin. From the next room, the sounds of thumping and creaking continued, and he looked at Caedes and rolled his eyes. "We're going to need to get our own place. If I have to listen to my sister and Taylor bumping uglies every night, I'll go crazy."

Caedes laughed, reaching for a kiss. It amazed him that he could kiss Mal whenever he wanted -- he still had a hard time believing Mal would want to kiss him at all. Rolling to

his side, he let his fingers lazily trace circles over Mal's sleek chest. "Are you sure about this, Mal? Us, I mean."

Mal captured his hand and brought it to his lips, kissing his palm. "Are you kidding? Caedes, you fit me, in here," he said, placing Caedes' hand over his heart. "I felt it from the very beginning, from the first time I saw you."

The memory was bittersweet for Caedes, and it must have shown in his smile, because Mal called him on it. "You're thinking about your brother, aren't you? Caedes--"

"I know, I know. I didn't have a choice, but it still hurts, Mal. I keep wondering why I didn't notice it sooner... how I missed it. He was sick, Mal, really sick, and I never let myself see it. I kept make excuses for him, all our lives. Gar must've seen it, but he fucking fostered it. He *wanted* us to be animals, Mal, to let that part of ourselves rule us. Nex was exactly what he wanted -- I was the one who disappointed him."

"Gar was an asshole."

"Yeah, but we *let* him do a lot of the stuff he did. We could have said 'no', Mal."

"You were children, Caedes, just kids, and Gar was the only father you remembered. Of course, you'd believe him and do as he ordered. You didn't have a choice back then. He abused you both." Mal's arm slipped under Caedes' shoulders, pulling him into a strong embrace. "I'm just glad he didn't manage to mess your head up, too."

Caedes shook his head sadly. "I *was* screwed up, for a long time. I believed him, just like Nex did. It was only after I got older that I started to see holes in his stories. Even then, I felt as if I was betraying him because I didn't feel the kind of joy in killing that he expected. The kind Nex had." He shivered, remembering the wild light that would come into his brother's eyes when he killed. "I even felt badly for him after he attacked Nex, and talked Nex out of killing him! How fucked up is that?"

"It's not fucked up at all. It's called being compassionate, even when you have reason to hate, and that alone sets you apart from them, Caed. You're not like Gar and Nex, and you're definitely not like Cain. You're you, you're special, and baby, you're all mine."

Caedes smiled, playing with a tendril of Mal's sleek, black hair. "I am, huh?"

"Oh, *hell* yes. For now to forever. Mine."

The possessive tone in Mal's voice sent a shiver of excitement tripping along Caedes' spine. He found that he liked it, liked belonging to Mal, and liked even more that Mal wanted him in the first place. "Okay. I can live with that, I think."

"You *think*?"

"I know."

"Better, because the thought of anyone else having you like this, touching you, having you touch them, makes me really cranky. I might have to shift and hurt somebody."

"Oh, no!" Caedes protested in mock horror. "A cranky horse! What will we do?" His laughter muted into a soft, needy sigh when Mal rolled over on top of him, treating him to the full measure of Mal's hard-muscled body pressing against every inch of his own.

Mal's mouth found his, tongue pushing in deep, as if he were laying claim to Caedes. "We belong to each other. Belong *with* each other." Mal's breath was warm and sweet as he left Caedes' mouth and began to nuzzle his throat. Caedes' body responded, his cock stirring again. It surprised him to feel how ready he was for Mal, even though they'd barely finished making love a few minutes ago.

When Mal's lips sucked at Caedes' throat, his teeth nipping hard enough to leave a mark, Caedes' cock jerked as if in surrender. "Mine," Mal growled. "My mark. My man."

"Yours," Caedes whispered, fingers touching the small bruise. He reached for a similar mark he'd left on Mal's shoulder. "Mine."

"Ours," Mal said. Then he began laying a trail of wet kisses along the center of Caedes' body, and when his lips closed over the head of Caedes' cock, Caedes forgot why he'd ever been worried.

Mal was right. They fit together, and he knew in his soul that he'd finally come home.

Ghost covered his face with a pillow, pressing down hard.

"What the hell are you doing?" Aiden asked, trying to pull the pillow away. They were naked, covered in sweat and semen, and he wanted some cuddling, but Ghost was acting peculiar. "Ghost?"

"Kill me. Right now, Aiden. If you love me, you'll help me suffocate myself."

"Ghost!" Aiden cried, laughing, ripping the pillow away. "Stop that! Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not being ridiculous -- I'm being honest. Do hear that racket? Forcing me to listen to a houseful of horny shifters is cruel and unusual punishment. It'd be kinder to kill me."

Aiden laughed again, reaching for a kiss. "Don't be stupid. Pretend it's the house settling."

"Settling on what? A land mine field? For a minute, I thought Jax and Dakota were going to bang their bed through the floor into the fucking kitchen!"

"It wasn't as bad as all that. Besides, you don't really know if it was Jax and Dakota. It could've been Oscar and Deidre, or Mal and--"

"The others don't fucking *howl*, Aiden... oh, no. There they go again!" Ghost groaned as the thumps and creaks began anew. His hands stretched for the pillow, but Aiden tossed it off the bed, out of reach.

Aiden scowled at him, and Ghost finally sighed, as if in defeat. He smiled, pulling Aiden down for a kiss. "Okay, so I won't take the coward's way out -- yet." His face grew somber, his fingers tenderly touching Aiden's cheek. "How do you feel about all this, Aiden? No one's really asked you. Caedes is your relative, after all. He's a connection to your past, and I already know how you feel about Cain and the rest. If this is going to be a problem for you, I want to know now."

Aiden stretched out next to Ghost, resting his head on Ghost's shoulder. He smoothed a hand over Ghost's chest and rock-hard belly. "It's funny, Ghost. I spent a lot of years worrying about losing control over the Other. When I first heard who Caedes was, I nearly panicked. I was scared shitless that the Other would recognize Cain's scent and try to break free, but it didn't even stir."

"I told you before, Aiden. The Other is a part of *you*. You control it, just as you control your eagle. Even in shape of the Other, you're still *you*."

Aiden nodded. "I believe that now. Caedes is the same way, I think. He may have Cain's blood, but that doesn't define or control who he is. I'm glad Jax let him stay. I think I'm going to like getting to know my second cousin."

"Good. Now either kiss me, or pass me that fucking pillow. If I have to listen to another round of screams and howls, I want to be either too fucking horny to notice, or dead."

Aiden laughed, and picked the first option.

Epilogue
Nine months later

The hills and pastures surrounding the ranch house were quiet except for the occasional lowing of cattle or calf's bawl. The darkness was thick; only a half moon, hanging in the blackness like a Cheshire cat's grin, shed thin silver light over the ranch's property. Spring was ending; soon summer would return to warm the earth.

The past months had been a nightmare for Jax and Dakota, and everyone else at the ranch. They'd needed to come up with a story for Wheaton's death. Tai told the new sheriff about the kidnapping, and said that a bear broke into the cabin and killed Wheaton. She said she'd escaped while the bear was attacking Joe.

The sheriff found the body of his predecessor in Wheaton's shed, and eventually found the missing police cruiser at the bottom of a pond on Wheaton's property. Dakota and Jax sent a large donation to the family of the murdered sheriff, and the case had been closed, but not until after a lengthy investigation during which the police had gone over the Shifting Sands with a fine toothcomb. It'd been unnerving and stressful for everyone.

Now, just when Jax had finally begun to relax...

"I am *not* doing this again, Dakota!" Jax shouted, snatching his arm away from Dakota's grip. It took quite a bit of force to free himself; the material of his sleeve tore with a loud *ripping* sound. "This isn't fair. I did it the last time. Get someone else!"

"Who would I get, Jax? God knows, Taylor is of no value right now. He looks like he's caught halfway between pissing his drawers and puking up last week's breakfast. Please, just come on! We're running out of time!"

"Why *not* Taylor? He's the one who got us into this situation. What about Deidre or Oscar -- if you think about it, this is all their fault anyway, you know. They just *had* to go and procreate. Now look where it's gotten us."

"I don't want to be in there without you. I *need* you, Jax. Come on!" Dakota yelled again. This time he took hold of Jax's collar, pulling Jax along after him. Jax found he had no alternative but to follow --it was either that, or risk strangling himself trying to break free. For an instant, he wondered if it might not be easier than facing what lay waiting for him inside the infirmary.

A shrill scream punctured the stillness of the hallway. Taylor stumbled out of the infirmary door, looking disheveled and pale. "Dakota, hurry! Something's happening!"

"We're coming!" Dakota answered, and before Jax could open his mouth to argue again, he found himself shoved inside the room.

Tai lay on the bed, hands twisted in the sheet that covered her from neck to thigh, her feet planted in metal stirrups, knees bent. Her eyes were wild with pain and fear, her face red and shiny with sweat. She looked over at them and bared her teeth in a scowl that turned Jax's bowels to water.

"Oh, Lord... here we go again," Jax murmured under his breath, following Dakota to the foot of the bed. Unlike the last time, when they'd delivered Deidre of Tai and Mal, they didn't have to work from a shoebox full of household items. The infirmary was well equipped for events such as this one.

Dakota slipped his arms into a green surgical gown, snapped a pair of latex gloves over his hands, and pulled a paper mask over his mouth and nose. He pointed toward a duplicate set of items and motioned for Jax to do the same. Shiny, sterilized instruments were laid out carefully on a tray, and the entire room was well lit by a pair of powerful overhead lamps.

They illuminated everything a little *too* well, in Jax's opinion. He cringed, and tried to avoid looking as Dakota positioned himself to help deliver Tai's baby.

"The head is crowning, Tai! Taylor, help her breathe, like we practiced," Dakota ordered. "Jax, get the clamp and scissors ready for when I ask for them."

A memory played in Jax's head, a flashback to nineteen years earlier. He saw a nearly identical scene playing out in his mind's eye, except it was Deidre on the bed, screaming. He felt the ghost of his own terror, saw Dakota trying to keep everyone else calm even though he was panicked himself, and then saw a pair of squirming, pink bodies, one coming moments after the other. He heard a dim echo of two sweet little cries; remembered twin miracles wrapped in matching blankets.

"Here it comes, one more push!" Dakota's voice brought Jax back to the present, and despite his efforts not to watch, he found himself staring as a small body slid into Dakota's big hands. A little boy, absolutely perfect, ten fingers, ten toes, a tiny rosebud mouth, and a shock of black hair, looking as if he'd been dipped in strawberry Jell-O. Jax held his breath as he watched Dakota lay the baby on Tai's stomach, suctioning out his minuscule nostrils. Dakota's pinkie finger swiped the baby's mouth, and then thumped the bottom of his miniature feet. When the baby began to cry, his skin quickly turning rosy pink, Jax felt his fear drain away, replaced by a wave of relief choking him, burning his eyes.

"He's beautiful," he whispered, taking his eyes off the baby only long enough to exchange a tender look with Dakota. Then he roughly cleared his throat, trying to keep his emotions in check. It wouldn't do to start bawling like his brand-new grandnephew in front of Tai, and especially not in front of Taylor. The human was still learning his place in the hierarchy of Jax's Pack, and seeing the alpha break down into sentimental sobs would only confuse him. He'd get all uppity if he thought Jax had a weakness, and Jax

would be forced to take a bite out of his ass to set him straight again, which would only upset Tai and piss off Dakota.

"Go on, Jax. We're just about done here. Go tell the others," Dakota said as he snipped the cord and handed the baby to Tai. Taylor was hovering close, looking pleased and proud, a goofy, slightly dazed, happy grin plastered on his face.

Just as he had with Tai and Mal, Jax was hesitant to leave the newborn. The baby was the newest member of the Pack, and Jax, as alpha, felt an instant bond with him. He didn't want to trust care of the baby to anyone else, not even his parents. "Are you sure there aren't any more in there, Dakota? Last time, there were two. Maybe I should stay a while longer, just in case."

"Nope. There's only one this time."

"Positive?" He was stalling, and Dakota knew it.

"Yes," Dakota said, rolling his eyes. "Go on now, Jax. Let me finish up in here so Tai and Taylor can have a few minutes alone with the baby."

"But--"

"Jax, *go*, hon," Dakota urged. "Everybody's waiting outside to hear." He turned his attention back to his work.

Jax turned toward the door, fighting his instincts, forcing himself to leave the baby to the care of his parents. They were barely more than children themselves! What did they know about infants? Taylor would probably drop him on his head. It took a supreme effort for Jax to force himself to reach for the doorknob and turn it.

"Uncle Jax?" Tai's voice was wispy and weary, calling to him. He paused, looking back at her. "We just wanted you both to know that we're naming the baby Jackson Dakota. If it weren't for you two, none of us would be here, including him."

Jax felt his throat constrict with unexpected tears. He leaned over, and touched a finger to the baby's downy cheek. The baby's head instinctively turned toward his touch, his little cupid's bow mouth making soft sucking noises. "Well, what do you know? Jackson Dakota. That's an awful big name for such a little guy. I guess you'll grow into it, though, huh? Maybe we could call you 'J.D.', for short."

"J.D. I like it," Dakota said, all smiles and teary eyes.

"Thanks, honey. You did real fine -- he's perfect." Jax placed a kiss on Tai's forehead, and turned to Taylor. "You too," he said, clapping Taylor on the shoulder, then forced his face into a scowl and poked a finger in Taylor's chest. "Don't drop him."

As soon as he turned his back to Taylor, Jax's smile returned, and he left to tell everyone else about J.D., the newest member of his Pack. He found himself in the center of a crush of people, crying and laughing -- Deidre and Oscar, Aiden and Ghost, Mal and Caedes. *My family*, Jax thought, *mine and Dakota's. Damn, but we're two lucky sons of bitches.*

Outside, the seasons turned, and life went on.

~ End

Bonus Extras

Shifting Perspective
by Kiernan Kelly

The day was cold, but the ice in Ashley's blood was infinitely colder. Nothing but a miracle could save Pepper once Ash caught his scent again.

Traitor.

Ash stood atop a huge boulder on the southern side of the mountain, overlooking the forest. Pepper was down there somewhere, hiding amid the oak and pine. Ash had tracked him across the pasture from the cabin, and three miles into the forest before losing his scent.

"Pepper! You can't hide from me forever. I'll find you, you bastard!" he bellowed. His voice echoed back to him, over and over, slowly fading away. A flock of blackbirds squawked in response, but as Ash listened, the forest fell silent once more.

He hadn't really expected Pepper to answer him anyway.

Coward.

No, be honest. Pep's not a coward. He's playing it smart, a small voice chided him. *You'd do the same if he was hunting you. Stay quiet. Stay hidden.*

Even as angry as Ash was, he felt a stirring of respect for Pepper successfully eluding him for so long. Not many could. Ash was an outstanding tracker; had been since he was old enough to go on the hunt. His nose was extremely sensitive; his daddy used to say Ash could follow the scent of a single pine needle through a skunk factory.

Yet Pepper eluded him, moving like quicksilver through the heavy underbrush, as silent as snowfall.

He had to give credit to Pepper; he'd thrown Ash off his trail three times already. Not that Pepper's efforts worked for long -- Ash had -picked his scent up quickly, twice, except

for the last time. The fresh snowfall from the recently ended storm helped cover his tracks.

The sun was hanging low in the western sky. Ash could still track in the darkness, but it would be more dangerous -- his eyesight was sharp, but not nearly as infallible as his nose. He'd climbed the steep hill at the foot of the mountain in desperation, thinking he could spot Pepper from above before he lost the light.

No such luck. Wherever Pepper had gone to ground, it was good and deep.

Ash would have to bed down for the night and wait for daybreak. He'd find Pepper tomorrow, corner him, and extract a pound of flesh for every wound Pepper had carved into Ash's heart.

Traitor.

Ash winced as the pain of Pepper's betrayal renewed itself. Nothing and no one in his experience had ever hurt him as much or as deeply as Pepper. Never. Ash could barely breathe thinking about it, but he couldn't stop the memory from rising up, no matter how hard he tried to squash it.

He found a spot protected from the wind in the lee of a boulder. He curled up on the hard, unforgiving rock and closed his eyes, shivering in the cold night air. When he finally slept, he relived the whole, sorry mess in his dreams.

"I'm going to head into town to pick up a few supplies. I need paint, and a few new paintbrushes if we're going to redo the bathroom," Ash said, shrugging into his heavy, sheepskin-lined coat. "Do you need anything?"

Pepper glanced up from the newspaper he was reading. "Nope. I'm good. Be careful on the roads. There's a storm coming."

"I will." Ash paused, his hand on the doorknob. A slow smile curved his lips. "Of course, by the time I get back I'll probably be freezing. I might catch pneumonia if I'm not warmed up properly."

Pepper sighed and rolled his eyes, but Ash could see him fighting an answering smile. "We've got blankets."

"Oh, blankets won't be nearly warm enough. You wouldn't want me to die from hypothermia, would you?"

"Electric blankets, then."

"Still not hot enough."

Pepper's smile broke through, deepening the dimples Ash loved, and making his brown eyes sparkle. "How about an electric blanket with me naked underneath it?"

Ash laughed. He left the door and walked over to the table, bending to meet Pepper's lips in a long, wet kiss. "Now, that'd warm me up in a hurry. I knew I could count on you. I'll be back as soon as I can. Love you."

"Love you, too."

Ash left, turning his collar up against the cold as he jogged across the yard to his pickup truck. He glanced back as he started the engine. The home he shared with Pepper was a cedar-shingled three-room cabin set well back from the other outbuildings on the Shifting Sands Ranch. It wasn't big, but it was perfect for the two of them.

Well, it was perfect *now*, but it hadn't seemed that way when Dakota and Jax first assigned Ash and Pepper as bunkmates two years ago.

When Ash first met Pepper, Pepper's body and finely sculpted features had immediately attracted him. Pepper was tall and broad-shouldered, with narrow hips, long legs, and the most perfectly shaped ass Ash had ever seen. Pepper's skin was smooth, the color of café au lait, and his eyes were the same dark brown as a cup of hot chocolate. *Bedroom eyes*, Ash remembered thinking, *the sort of eyes a man can lose himself in for hours*. Even Pepper's hair, a wild mess of black dreadlocks, was unique and appealing. Ash was smitten with him instantly.

That was, of course, until he'd actually tried *living* with Pepper.

Pepper, as it turned out, was the textbook definition of obsessive-compulsive.

"What are you doing?" Pepper hissed, snatching a heavy, crystal paperweight from Ash's hand. He carefully set it back on the desk, in the same spot it'd occupied before Ash picked it up. "This goes on the desk."

"I thought it would look good on the mantle," Ash said, picking it back up again.

"Don't touch anything," Pepper growled, his dark eyes flashing, snatching the paperweight away again and replacing it in the exact same spot on the desk.

"Hey, it's my house, too!"

"Doesn't matter. Don't touch anything."

Things had only gotten worse from that point on. Pepper freaked if Ash moved *anything*, which of course, resulted in Ash shuffling things around as often as possible. In time,

when he realized it irked Pepper more to find things *slightly* moved, rather than completely relocated, Ash grew quite devious in his methods. Instead of actually moving things from place to place, he slid them an inch or so to the left or right, or turned them around backward.

It drove Pepper nuts.

"What did you do this time?" Pepper would ask the moment he stepped inside the door. "I know you did something..." His eyes would dart left to right, up and down, trying to figure out what Ash had moved in his absence.

"Nothing. I didn't touch a thing," Ash would always lie. He'd bite back a laugh as he watched Pepper make the rounds, checking everything from the kitchen cabinets to the curio cabinet to the bathroom vanity for anything amiss, and laugh outright at Pepper's triumphant shout when he finally found the spices Ash had turned backward on their pantry shelf, or the socks he'd balled up instead of folding.

The other thing Ash could always count on irritating Pepper was teasing him about his animal-self. Ash nearly wet himself laughing the first time he watched Pepper shapeshift.

"What in the hell are you supposed to be?" Ash snorted, feeling laughter bubble up and over at the sight of the large dog with his long, black coat resembling dreadlocks.

Pepper shifted back into his human form immediately, obviously offended. He grabbed a pillow from the sofa and covered his groin, to Ash's disappointment. Pepper had a cock worthy of study. "I'm a Komondor, asshole."

"Just the asshole? I'd hate to see what the rest of it looks like."

"Not just...oh, fuck you, Ash. A Komondor is a breed of dog."

"It looks like a breed of mop."

"This coming from a guy who changes into a bloodhound. You're not much more than a nose with feet."

Looking back, Ash realized that, for Pepper, Ash was probably as irritating as hell to live with, but he didn't regret a moment of his nuisance campaign. It was what eventually led to Pepper's blow-up, and ended with them becoming lovers.

Ash remembered the day as if it were yesterday -- every moment, every second chiseled into his memory. He'd been sitting in the small living room/kitchen combination, on a chair by the fireplace, waiting for Pepper to come home. His eyes slid toward the pantry as he fought to hide a smile. Pepper insisted all the canned goods be stacked in alphabetized order, and Ash had rearranged all of them. The canned asparagus was now *after* the tomato soup, and the water chestnuts were *before* the beets.

Pepper was going to lose his mind when he opened the pantry door.

He did, too. Pepper actually screamed when he opened the door, the cans he held in his hands crashing to the floor. "Why, Ash? What did I ever do to you? That's it! I can't take this anymore!"

With a growl that grew into a ferocious snarl, Pepper turned on Ash. His dark eyes snapped with furious fire. Pepper launched himself at Ash with a speed that was almost supernatural, knocking Ash, chair and all, over to the floor.

Ash was caught totally unprepared for the power of Pepper's assault. He knew Pepper would be pissed, would howl and rage as he meticulously re-alphabetized everything in the pantry, but he never guessed Pepper would actually go for his throat.

A hard fist clipped his jaw, stars dancing before Ash's eyes. He squirmed furiously underneath Pepper's body, trying to wiggle away from the fists pounding on him. He twisted a hand in Pepper's dreads, pulling hard. Pepper's upper torso followed his hair, moving enough to the right to allow Ash to roll out from under Pepper's weight.

He scrambled to his feet, his body tense, on full alert. "What the fuck is wrong with you? All I did was move a few cans!"

"You don't get it, do you? I can't help being like this, Ash. You do it just to see me get upset! You think it's funny, but it's not a game to me. Why do you hate me so much?"

Ash blinked, watching the fury in Pepper's eyes fizzle, replaced by sadness, which upset Ash more than Pepper's attack had. "I don't hate you, Pepper. I just don't understand why you have to be so anal about everything."

"Do you think I asked to be this way? I have OCD, Ash. That's obsessive-compulsive disorder, in case you didn't know. I *need* to have everything arranged in a certain order, and not because I want to be difficult or piss you off. I can't help it."

"*Why*, for God's sake? The world isn't going to end if the vegetables aren't alphabetized, Pepper." He rubbed his jaw, working it back and forth, wondering if Pepper's powerful punch had cracked it.

Pepper looked defeated, taking Ash's mind off the hurt in his jaw. "I'm not stupid, Ash. I *know* nothing bad is going to happen just because you messed with the way I had the towels folded in the linen closet, or rearranged the cleaning supplies. My problem is that I can't help feeling something *might* happen if I don't keep things in order. If I don't, if things get messed up, I feel like the world *is* going to end. My blood pressure shoots up, I start to shake, and..."

"And what?"

Pepper sighed, and seemed to grow smaller. "I get scared, okay? Petrified. I can't function, can't even think. You don't know what it's like to live in fear everyday, even when your rational mind tells you everything's okay. To *have* to wash your hands exactly seven times, or double and triple check the locks on the door, even though you know you just locked it. To spend *hours* making sure everything is in its place, then rechecking just in case..." His beautiful dark eyes glimmered, and he turned away, but not before Ash noticed tears welling up.

Suddenly, Ash felt like a total and complete shit. All along, he'd thought Pepper was just being an asshole, being difficult to spite Ash for some reason. Now, he knew differently, and guilt settled on his shoulders like a massive weight. "Jesus, Pepper, why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Would you have cared? Would you have even listened? I don't expect you to understand, Ash...nobody ever does. My own parents didn't understand. They accepted my shapeshifting easier than they did my need to keep things in order. My dad said he'd rather me be a freak than crazy."

"You're not a freak, and you're not crazy, either."

"Yeah? Tell that to the friends I lost because they couldn't stand me fussing over stuff all the time. Tell it to Levi, the man who said he loved me, and then dumped me because I insisted on alphabetizing the medicine cabinet."

"Pepper..." Ash found himself at a loss for words. He hadn't understood, didn't realize how much Pepper suffered every time Ash moved things around. He'd thought it was all a joke, but now he realized it wasn't...not to Pepper. To Pepper, it was a serious business, and affected his health.

"I'm sorry I hit you. I won't blame you if you want to bring it to Dakota and Jax."

"Nah, I'll live. It's nothing, don't sweat it," Ash lied. His jaw hurt, but it was nothing compared to the sick feeling in his stomach. It was at that moment he realized how fond he'd grown of Pepper.

"Thanks. Look, we'll go talk to Dakota and Jax anyway. If they can't find somebody else for you to room with, I'll just leave the ranch. It'll be better for everybody," Pepper said quietly. He walked into the kitchen, and began picking up the cans he'd dropped on the floor.

"What? No! Pepper, I don't want another roommate. If you need to keep things in order, that's fine. I won't mess with anything again. I promise," Ash said fervently. He clambered to his feet, joining Pepper in the kitchen. Sinking to his knees next to him, Ash touched his fingers to Pepper's face, turning him. The tears Ash had seen welling up

before had fallen, streaking Pepper's cheeks. "Pepper, I like you. I really do. I'm sorry I didn't understand."

"You don't have to put up with this, Ash. You deserve a roommate who doesn't go ballistic when you forget to put the milk on the left-hand side of the top shelf in the fridge."

"No, I deserve to be horsewhipped. I was an insensitive jerk, Pepper. I'm sorry. Please, don't leave." He stared into Pepper's eyes, watching a range of emotions swirl within them -- surprise, doubt, and lastly, hope.

"Really? You want me to stay?"

"Hell, yes. Pepper, I want you to stay. I want you... period," Ash said. He hadn't meant to say the words, but there they were, out and hanging between them. He realized he meant it, too. Pepper was sexy, smart, funny, and if he was a little quirky about having things in their place, well... it was a small price to pay for the entire package. He felt his body tighten, warmth flooding his lower belly as an answering desire flashed in the depths of Pepper's dark eyes.

Pepper blinked, shaking his head, turning away. "You're playing with my mind again. That really sucks, Ash. How much of an asshole are you? I just bared my fucking soul to you and--"

Ash growled. "Damn it, Pepper! You're the most exasperating, irritating man I've ever met, and it has nothing to do with your OCD. Here I am, telling you that I want you, and you immediately assume I'm busting your chops. Look at me! Do I *look* like I'm fucking teasing you?"

Pepper's gaze, heavy with suspicion, darted toward Ash. After a brief, intense staring contest, during which Ash never blinked, Pepper's lips parted in a sigh. "Shit. You're not kidding, are you?"

"No, damn it. I really do want you. I don't think I realized until now just how much." He reached for Pepper's hand, taking the can of French-cut green beans from him. "Do you need to put these back in order before?"

"Before what?" Pepper's voice was as soft as a whisper.

"Before I take you to bed," Ash replied. He ducked his head forward, meeting Pepper's lips in a gentle kiss. "If you want me, that is."

Pepper grinned and nodded, but his eyes immediately shifted to the array of canned goods on the floor, then up toward the messy piles in the pantry. Pepper looked torn, and for the first time, Ash understood. He chuckled, kissing Pepper on the cheek. "Okay, I get

it. Come on, I'll help you," he said, reaching to put the green beans in their proper place on the shelf.

Pepper grinned widely, and it became a race between them to get the cans stacked neatly in alphabetical order. They finished in a few minutes and paused, looking at one another, each waiting for the other to make the first move.

To Ash's surprise, Pepper took the initiative. His hand flew to the back of Ash's neck, and the next thing Ash knew he was on the receiving end of the deepest, most heated kiss he'd ever experienced. Pepper took him by surprise, his tongue forceful, lips bruising. Ash groaned, and threw his whole being into it, kissing Pepper back for all he was worth.

Ash felt time freeze, as if he and Pepper were alone in the universe, as if the entire world had stopped and only the two of them still moved.

Then the moment shattered, exploding in a blizzard of energy: hands digging for skin, tugging on clothing, buttons flying, zippers breaking, and four feet moving in a stilted jig toward the only bedroom. It ended in the two of them falling onto Ash's twin bed, the closest one to the door, in a tangle of arms and legs. Ash's shirt was still on, although torn open, revealing his chest; Pepper's t-shirt had been discarded somewhere along the way in from the kitchen. Both of their pants were unzipped and pushed halfway to their knees.

They never fully undressed. They were too eager for each other, too excited, too turned-on to bother. Hands snaked into underwear, fingers wrapping around firm, hot flesh. Tongues swept mouths, teeth nipped at whatever skin was within reach; a moan, a gasp, muscles grew tight, backs arched, and white cotton briefs soaked up semen.

Afterward, Ash lay with his head cradled on Pepper's shoulder, one finger lazily tracing the circular, pebbled nipple on Pepper's broad chest. He smiled, watching a single drop of perspiration trace the contours between Pepper's pectoral muscles to his washboard stomach. "Well, that was...fast," he said, looking up into Pepper's eyes.

"Not good? I thought it was pretty spectacular, myself," Pepper said, arching a sleek eyebrow at him.

"Didn't say it wasn't *good*...said it was fast."

"They say practice makes perfect."

"Oh, then I guess we're going to need lots of practice. Hours of practice. Days. Weeks." Pepper's answering grin mirrored Ash's own.

It turned out to be two years' worth of practice. Ash had enjoyed every minute of it, too. His fondness for Pepper, the feeling of friendship spiced by sexual attraction deepened into love.

Even Pepper's OCD hadn't interfered. Following along after Pepper as he triple-checked the stove's pilot lights every night, or watching him brush his teeth with exactly seventy-five strokes, became routine. Ash truly didn't mind. All he cared about was the tender look in Pepper's eyes every time he looked at Ash, the warm, sweet body crawling in next to him when the lights went out at night, and the passion between them that left them both sweaty and spent.

He'd always thought Pepper felt the same way.

He was wrong.

Almost two years to the day after he and Pepper had made love for the first time, Ash came home to an empty house, his arms loaded with painting supplies. It wasn't unusual for Pepper to be gone -- Pepper often had a different work schedule than Ash. What was odd was the scent Ash smelled when he walked in the door.

Mingling with Pepper's scent was the odor of whiskey, and the musk of a man's arousal, a stranger's, heavy and cloying.

His breath froze, constricting his chest until he could barely breathe. Pepper was cheating on him, sleeping with somebody else! He forced himself to follow the olfactory trail. It led from the parlor into the kitchen, then back into the bedroom.

Ash stood in front of the bedroom door, unwilling to open it. Beyond that door, he knew the room would be thick with the smell of Pepper's affair, of sex. He didn't want to smell it. His heart was broken badly enough already.

He was still standing there in front of the door, his body frozen with grief and betrayal, when he heard the front door open. A growl rumbled in his chest, and he found himself free to move again. Stalking into the living room, he faced Pepper with all the hurt and fury he felt welling to the surface and boiling over.

Pepper looked disheveled. His clothing was rumpled and dirty, an unusual state of being for him, considering his OCD rarely allowed him to leave the house mussed.

Whomever he's fucking must be pretty spectacular for Pepper to forget his compulsion about his appearance, Ash thought angrily. He never let loose like that with me. The thought that Pepper found sex with someone else enough to overwhelm his OCD hurt Ash even more, and fueled his anger.

He was so wounded, he couldn't speak. His hound roared to life, and a long, sorrowful baying passed his lips as he launched himself at Pepper.

"Ash! Ash, wait!" Pepper cried as Ash tackled him to the ground.

"Fucking bastard!" Ash screamed, refusing to hear whatever lies Pepper thought he could spew. The smell of another man was there, all over Pepper, and Ash's nose never lied. Nothing Pepper could say would excuse it.

Fists flew as they fought, their bodies rolling around the parlor, knocking over furniture. A heavy crystal vase smashed perilously closed to Ash's head; he ignored it, and landed a hard clip to Pepper's jaw.

Pepper caught him on the side of the head with a powerful punch of his own, stunning Ash for a moment, and slipped out from underneath Ash's weight. Before Ash's vision cleared, Pepper had stripped and shifted, and ran out into the night. Ash shifted, scented the air, and took off after him in hot pursuit.

Ash awoke with a start. A moonlit shadow stretched over the rock, a familiar scent in his nose.

"Wake up, shift, and fucking listen to me!" Pepper's voice called from nearby.

He was instantly alert, assailed by the memory of Pepper's betrayal and the pain it'd caused him. He snarled, jumping to his feet. Pepper was standing only a couple of feet away, in his human-form, nude, his skin dimpled with gooseflesh from the cold.

"Ashley, I asked you to shift. You're going to hear me out, and then after, if you still want my blood, you can have at me."

Ash bared his teeth, still growling.

"Shift, goddamn it!"

There was a tone in Pepper's voice, raw and sharp with grief that pierced Ash's anger, catching his attention. He shoved instinct to attack aside, and shifted, leveling Pepper with a baleful glare. "What? What can you possibly tell me that'll make the slightest bit of difference?"

"How about the fact that, for once, your incredible, infallible nose is *wrong*? That you made a mistake; jumped to fucking conclusions?"

"Bullshit. I know what I smelled."

Pepper's fists pounded against his thighs, every muscle tensed and defined. His distress was clear, in both his scent and his actions. Pepper was acting as if *he* was the wronged party in this, and it was confusing enough to take the edge off Ash's fury.

"I know what you *think* you smelled. I didn't cheat on you. I was home, puttering around in the kitchen, when Levi showed up at the door."

Ash cringed. It was worse than he'd thought -- Levi was Pepper's old boyfriend, the one Pepper claimed hurt him so badly by dumping him because of his OCD. For Pepper to choose somebody who'd hurt him over Ash was a low blow.

"You're *still* jumping to conclusions, Ash! I can tell by the look on your face. Will you just hear me out?"

He didn't want to hear it, but he nodded anyway. "Go ahead. I'm listening, but give me the courtesy of telling me the truth."

"I've never lied to you. If I wanted to -- which I don't -- you could smell it on me."

Well, that's true enough, Ash silently conceded. So far, he could detect no untruth in Pepper's scent. He waited for Pepper to speak again.

"I didn't want to let Levi inside, but he pushed past me. He was drunk, Ash. He made a pass at me, and when I pushed him away, he got violent."

"He hit you?"

"He tried. He dragged me into the bedroom before I could get away. I shifted and ran."

Ash was torn. His anger demanded he not believe Pepper, that he seek a pound of flesh for the wound to his honor, but his nose told him a different story. It insisted Pepper was telling him the truth. In an instant, the fury he felt shifted its focus away from Pepper.

Ash still wanted blood, but now the throat he yearned to rip out was Levi's for daring to hurt Pepper.

And his own, for mistrusting Pepper in the first place. He hated himself at that moment. "I... oh, God. I'm so sorry, Pepper. I just... I'm such an asshole!"

Pepper's body visibly relaxed, and a small, relieved smile played at his lips. "Yeah, you are, at times, but I understand how you would've thought it. That nose of yours can get you into deep shit, my friend. You need to learn to question what it smells, sometimes."

"Can you forgive me?"

"Depends. Will you promise not to fly off the handle like that again, and talk to me first?"

"Absolutely. I love you, you know. That's why it hurt so much when I thought you..."

"I love you, too, even though sometimes I want to brain you. We have to remember there are always different perspectives to a given situation. Two sides to a story. If we don't have trust, Ash, we have nothing."

Feeling overcome with emotions -- fear over what he'd nearly lost, shame for jumping to conclusions, overwhelming relief at being forgiven, and lingering fury at Levi, he nodded and stepped into Pepper's embrace.

Pepper's lips were sweet comfort to Ash's bruised and hurting soul. They held each other long after their kiss ended, each leaning against the other and finding strength.

"I'm going to kill Levi," Ash whispered, his lips brushing the smooth skin of Pepper's shoulder.

"No, you're not. We're going to talk to Dakota and Jax, and let them handle Levi."

"Pepper..."

"Don't *Pepper* me. You go for blood, and it'll start a war. Levi is a cat-shifter. The last thing we need is a blood feud between the cats and dogs."

"He hurt you."

"Only my pride. I couldn't fight him off -- he was too strong. Guess I need to hit the gym."

"I need to hit *him*. Hard."

Pepper chuckled, and Ash felt a trill of need bolt through him when Pepper's teeth playfully nipped at his throat. "My big, bad alpha, huh? Gonna protect your pack?"

"Damn straight."

"Want to know what I think? I think you should take a deep whiff of me right now. What do you smell?"

Ash breathed deeply, filling his lungs with Pepper's scent. He grinned, rubbing his body against Pepper's. "You're one horny bastard."

"Only for you, Ash. Remember that."

Ash sucked his breath in, feeling love flow, chasing away the last of his anger. "Let's go home."

Pepper surprised him by shaking his head. "No. It'll still smell like Levi in there. Let the house air out a while." He gently brought Ash to the ground, covering him with his body. "Besides, I don't want to wait."

"You sure? It's cold, snowy, and dirty out here," Ash said, staring into the dark eyes he loved so much.

"Really? Because all I can feel is your hot body, and all I can see is your smile."

Ash grinned, then crushed his lips to Pepper's. He was right. It suddenly felt a lot warmer, and Ash knew it had nothing to do with the cold, and everything to do with Pepper's love for him.

It was just a matter of perspective.

Catch of the Day
Kiernan Kelly

He cut through the icy water in a silvery-blue streak, quickly closing the distance between himself and his prey. He came up at the darting fish from underneath, turning belly up, eyes rolling white as he prepared to attack. One bite, and it was over, red darkening the water.

Life was easier in this form. Swim, eat, and swim again. There were no worries here, no nine-to-five job, no need for social niceties like conversation and political correctness. The law was simple here: the fast ate, and the slow got eaten.

He was fast.

The other form was much harder. There were rules when in the other form, lots of them. Gravity was one. Gravity sucked the big fat one as far as Dirk was concerned. It weighed you down, as if it were constantly trying to push you into the earth, to bury you prematurely.

People were another drawback to the other form. The humans always wanted to know things about him, asking prying questions when he stayed too long in one place. There were things about himself he couldn't talk about without being hauled in for psychiatric evaluation. He always needed to be on guard when he was in his other form, careful of every word he said. He hated that, too.

His animal self was territorial by nature, possessive, and it carried over into his human form. The life of a drifter held no appeal for him. It was in his blood to claim a home area and defend it to the death. People frowned on behavior like that, damn social animals that they were. They wanted to get up in his personal bubble and make nice all the time. Neighborhood watches. Block parties. Avon ladies.

It set his teeth on edge just thinking about it, and yet, there was a time when he'd tried desperately to make it work. He failed, of course, and miserably.

As much as he hated to admit it, as much as he wished otherwise, there was enough human in him to make the loneliness of this form almost unbearable. Sharks didn't mate except to procreate, and he wasn't the sort of creature -- as a shark or otherwise -- to be interested in participating in that particular process, no matter how lonely he got. First of all, female sharks were not known for their cuddling skills, and secondly, they didn't possess the body parts he found most attractive. Third was his inclination to snack on the female during mating. Biting out chunks of flesh during intercourse wasn't exactly conducive to a healthy, lasting relationship.

By the time the loneliness drove him from the depths to the shore again, he'd been underwater for nearly eight years.

The Change hit him at the same time as puberty, during a summer vacation at the beach. He counted himself lucky in that regard. Changing without notice, without explanation was difficult enough to handle for a fifteen-year old boy; imagine if he'd changed into a great white shark in the middle of the gymnasium during physical education class! At least when he changed the first time, he'd been in the water. He'd swum out to sea, and never looked back.

He supposed his parents thought him drowned. It was better that way, kinder. They'd never understand what'd really happened to him. He loved them; he didn't want them to know they'd birthed a freak.

The years had flown by since he first entered the sea. Swim, eat, and swim again. It was so easy to forget his other self, that he'd almost managed to lose the human part of him altogether, to forget what it was like to have friends, and people who cared about him.

In the end, he didn't forget, though. In the end, the loneliness became too much for him to bear, and he changed back into his human form, leaving the sea. He knew no one, had nowhere to go. He couldn't go home, that was for certain. He wouldn't allow his parents to go through the pain of losing him again if he decided to return to the ocean. Instead, he came ashore and stole clothes from a fishing boat docked nearby, and went in search of a job.

He never found employment, but eventually he did find a man who claimed to understand him.

Cain.

Cain could shift, too, but what Cain shifted into was a true monster, not like Dirk's shark. Cain's T-Rex form didn't belong in the natural order of the world... not anymore.

Dirk felt a shudder ripple across his thick, sandpapery skin as he thought about Cain and the Ultimate Predators. He'd run with them for a short while. His job was to scout waterways, looking for evidence of other shifters like themselves. Another shiver rocketed through him as he remembered the discomfort of swimming through the fresh water of rivers and lakes. Ugh. He could do it for a while, but it was nasty. Salt water was his natural habitat as a shark. Swimming in fresh water was like a human breathing polluted air -- breathe enough of it, and eventually it would kill you.

Still, being a member of the Ultimate Predators had its benefits. Sex, for one, all Dirk wanted, whenever he wanted it. There was always a man around, ready for him. It almost made up for being forced to swim in fresh water.

He drew the line the first time Cain ordered him to kill someone whose only crime was shifting into an herbivore.

"There is a man living on a ranch nearby. He is like us, but not," Cain said. "He is weak, a grass-eater. Kill him."

"*Kill* him? Why?" Dirk asked. "What's he done?"

Cain's answer was brutally short. "He exists."

Dirk was a predator, true enough, but he knew the difference between killing to eat, and murder. He also knew that while his shark's genealogy stretched back as far as Cain's T-Rex, to the Jurassic period if not even earlier, he was no match for Cain -- not on land, anyway. He'd made his escape the same night, slipping into the Mississippi, shifting into his shark and swimming through its murky, muddy waters to the Gulf of Mexico, then past the Florida Keys into the Atlantic.

He was alone once more, and this time, he thought it would be forever.

Swim, eat, and swim again.

Harper was a poor fisherman.

Not in the financial sense of the word -- he had a trust fund that rivaled the national treasury of a few small countries. In skill, however, he was a pauper.

The worst thing about his lack of expertise was the embarrassment. Harper came from a long line of expert fishermen. He was heir to the Dower Fish Corporation, one of the largest, most successful fishing companies on the planet.

It wasn't for lack of trying. Harper's father had taken him out nearly every weekend since Harper was a young child, trying to teach him to fish. They'd begun with freshwater fish, in small streams and rivers, like trout and bass, then as he'd gotten older, the big, deep sea fish. Tuna. Swordfish. Shark.

He'd never caught a single thing.

No one understood why, when everyone else in the fishing party caught at least one or two fish, Harper's hook always came up empty. Maybe it was something in his scent, some unidentifiable odor that passed from his fingers to the bait, and warned the fish off. *Danger, Will Robinson. Danger.*

His latest attempt had been only a week ago. He'd gone deep sea fishing with his brothers, Hank and Tom. His brothers landed a marlin each to take home as a trophy. All Harper took home was a migraine and a severe sunburn. Shamed again, Harper finally had enough. He told his father he wanted out of the business.

"I'm just not cracked up to be a fisherman, dad. I'm the company joke! You don't need me... you've got Tom and Hank. All I do is provide comic relief," Harper said.

"Nonsense! You're a Dower, Harper. Fishing is in your blood," his father retorted. "It would kill your mother and me if any of our sons left the family business. If you leave this company, I swear I'll cut you off without a cent!"

Harper didn't really believe his father would do it, but he hated the thought of disappointing his parents yet again. He sighed, slumping into a chair in front of his father's desk. "Okay, dad, okay." Maybe if he was extraordinarily lucky, on his next fishing trip the fish would catch *him*, haul him overboard, and he'd drown.

"Look, why don't you take a couple of weeks off? Take my boat, sail down to the islands. Who knows? Maybe if you're relaxed, you'll catch something," his father said, smiling.

Harper resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He was sick to death of trying to fish, and yet here his father was, sending him out on yet *another* fishing trip. It would end just as disastrously as every other one, Harper just knew it, but nodded his head anyway. Better to agree, and be done with it. He liked sailing well enough, and with no one else aboard, he didn't have to fish. He could just say he did. No one would ever know.

Maybe he could pick up a nice, fat swordfish from one of the markets in the islands, and pass it off as his own. It was deceitful, certainly, and he'd never stooped so low before, but at least it might put an end to the joking. Maybe then, people -- including his father -- would leave him alone.

This was how he found himself alone aboard his father's 447 Sport Sedan slicing through the cold Atlantic off the coast of New Jersey, and how he found himself in the middle of a whopper of a fish tale no one would *ever* believe, even if he could bring himself to tell it.

The thrum of a powerful engine in his territory sounded like rolling thunder underwater, rippling irritatingly over Dirk's skin. A single large push of his tail sent him bulleting through the water toward the source of the sound.

The sound was familiar to him. It was a fishing trawler, come in search of tuna, or whatever other fish they could snare. Thousands upon thousands of wriggling fish would be caught in the trawler's gigantic nets, swiftly depleting the area of prey. Whatever wasn't caught, would flee Dirk's territory.

It wasn't the first time a trawler had fished an area bare, forcing Dirk to leave his established territory and fight for another. Anger fueled his muscles as he shot through the water toward the trawler, surfacing along side the large black ship.

He heard the cries of the sailors aboard at the sight of his massive dorsal fin cutting through the waves. He was large, even for a great white, very reminiscent of the shark in the movie *Jaws*, which he remembered from when he'd been a kid. He hoped his size would be enough to frighten the fishermen aboard the trawler to leave the area.

Instead, it seemed to excite them. As he circled the ship, he rolled to his left, watching the men jostle each other at the rail to get a glimpse of him. *Stupid humans. Come on down in the water, and we'll see how eager you are to see me!*

How he wished he could take a bite out of the ship like the shark had in the movie, but he was far from stupid. His teeth were razor sharp, but wouldn't make much of a scratch on the trawler's thick metal hull. He settled for circling the ship slowly, trying to appear intimidating.

For a moment, he thought his ploy might be working. There was a flurry of activity onboard. He grinned a toothy smile and redoubled his efforts, tightening his circle, swimming faster.

The trawler gave no indication it was leaving. Instead, Dirk felt a sharp pain just at the crease where his dorsal fin met his back, and the scent of blood filled the water. He couldn't see his wound, didn't know what they'd done to him. Had he been harpooned? Shot? Of the two, he prayed for the second. If the fishermen had succeeded in sinking a harpoon into his flesh, he was done for. He'd never be able to swim hard enough to pull the backward-barbed hook free from his flesh.

He swam, the loss of blood already making him feel slightly lightheaded, but felt relieved as he put distance between himself and the trawler, and nothing pulled him backward. *Not a harpoon, then. They must've shot me.*

A gunshot wound didn't worry him nearly as much as the loss of blood. He was losing quite a bit of it, and the scent would draw sharks from miles around. If he didn't get out of the water soon, they'd be on him, jaws snapping in a feeding frenzy, eating him alive. He was too weak to fight them all off.

He pushed himself, swimming as if his life depended on it -- which it did. The first of the sharks were already on his tail. Blues, from the smell of them, three or four adult males. A fresh burst of fear accelerated his heart when he caught the scent of another great white joining the blues in their pursuit.

Yet another scent mixed with the smell of blood and sharks, something metallic, and human. He headed for it, sighting a ship in the near distance, bobbing at the surface. He didn't care who the ship belonged to -- they were human, and he knew his chances of survival were greater with them than the predators who pursued him. He surfaced and reached the side of the boat. Using the last of his energy, he launched himself out of the water and onto the deck of the boat, landing nearly at the feet of a human male.

And shifted.

Harper was stunned speechless. The only sound he could make was a half-strangled croak as he stared at the naked stranger lying at his feet, bleeding onto the deck.

One moment he'd been admiring the stars, having dropped anchor for the night, and the next, he was screaming bloody murder as the biggest fucking shark he'd ever seen shot out of the water and flopped onto the deck. The scream died in his throat as if cut off with a knife when the shark *changed* into a human being right before Harper's very eyes.

There was only one cohesive thought in Harper's mind -- he'd finally gone crazy. All the years of enduring shame because he wasn't a great fisherman, all the jokes at his expense about the millions that'd gotten away, the humiliation, had finally driven him stark, raving, batshit. He was hallucinating. It was the only conceivable explanation for the naked shark-man.

The man moaned and tried to push himself up, but fell back to the deck with a thud. Harper saw bright red blood oozing from a wound high on the man's right shoulder.

"Please, help me," the man asked in a raspy voice. "I've been shot."

"Mister, being shot is the least of your worries. Did you know you were just a gigantic shark? All teeth, and fins, and shit?"

"It hurts. I think I'm dying. Please..."

"No, you're not dying. You're *my* hallucination, and what I say, goes."

Harper could swear the man bared his teeth. "I'm not a hallucination! I'm real, and I need help!"

Pushy for a delusion, Harper thought, a little crossly. "Fine. I'll get the first aid kit. Stay here."

"Where do you think I'm going to go?" Evidently, bleeding to death brought out the shark-man's sarcastic streak.

"I don't know... you're a figment of my imagination. Maybe you'll turn into a bird next, and fly away."

"Get the first aid kit!" the shark-man yelled through gritted, brilliantly white teeth.

"I'm going! I'm going!" Harper muttered. *I get no respect, not even from my own delusions*, he thought petulantly as he trotted down into the salon and hunted up the first

aid kit. He brought it topside, half expecting the shark-man to be gone, or perhaps replaced by a clown-kangaroo, or a wombat-astronaut.

The shark-man lay exactly where Harper had left him, seeming to have done nothing in Harper's absence but bleed. He carefully helped the man sit up, searching for an exit wound. There was none, and upon closer inspection of the wound on the man's shoulder, Harper realized the bullet had only grazed him.

The wound was deep enough to bleed copiously, though. Harper disinfected it, and covered it with a thick gauze pad. A few strips of medical tape finished the job.

"There. You'll be as good as new in no time, Flipper," Harper said, snapping the lid of the first aid box closed.

"I'm a shark, not a dolphin. My name is Dirk."

"Funny name for a shark. Then again, they called the shark in *Jaws*, 'Bruce'," he replied. "I'm Harper."

Dirk sniffed. "Well, there's the pot calling the kettle chartreuse. *Harper*? What the hell kind of a name is *that*? You got a brother named 'Cellist'? A sister named 'Pianist'?"

"Hey... I get ribbed enough in real life. My delusions are not allowed to make fun of me."

A hand that felt warm, strong, and unsettlingly *real*, patted Harper on the arm. "Harper, I'm not a hallucination, and you're not crazy. You really did see me change from a shark to a man. I'm a shapeshifter. I've spent most of my life in the water in my shark form. I got shot by the crew of a fishing trawler, and hopped aboard your ship because I was about to become the blue plate special for a pack of my distant relatives."

Harper blinked, seeing sincerity in Dirk's black eyes. "I... I think I'd rather be crazy, if it's all the same to you. It's easier."

Dirk sighed, a little dramatically for Harper's taste, and hauled himself to his feet. He swayed, and Harper jumped up to steady him. "Fine. Believe what you want. Is there somewhere I can lie down for a while? I'm feeling a little woozy."

"Oh, yeah, sure. Come on. This ship has two cabins. My stuff is in the master stateroom, but you can have the midship cabin. It's comfy in there, and has its own head." Harper didn't want to think about why he felt the need to make his delusion comfortable, or why Dirk would have need of a bathroom, if he was an illusion. Harper was swiftly finding out that thinking about it too much gave him a headache. Instead, he led Dirk below deck to the midship stateroom.

The room was compact, but boasted a queen-sized bed and several fluffy pillows. As Dirk crawled over the mattress and laid himself down carefully atop the covers on his belly, Harper once against noticed that he was naked. This time, he also noticed what a fantastic body Dirk possessed.

He was lean and well-muscled, without an inch of fat to spare on his six-foot-something frame. It occurred to Harper that Dirk was so perfect, he could serve as a living, breathing anatomy poster of the human male body. From his biceps to his gluts (*particularly his gluts*, Harper thought. *I've never seen such a phenomenal ass in real life*), he was male perfection in the flesh.

Harper gave himself a mental pat on the back. He didn't think he had it in him to dream up a guy who looked like Dirk. Whenever Harper masturbated, his fantasy men were always faceless. They were hunky bodies without names, without personalities. He'd never imagined a man like Dirk before, so perfect in the minutest detail, from his strange, silvery hair, to the few small scars marring his satiny flesh here and there, and a smattering of freckles.

Dirk began snoring softly, and Harper fought a yawn. He forced himself to linger for another few minutes, soaking up the sight of Dirk's firm, round ass, strong back, and long legs. Harper had no doubt that after he had gotten a good night's sleep, his hallucination would be over, and Dirk would vanish.

Sighing over the injustice of it all, Harper made his way to the master stateroom, shucked his clothing, crawled under the covers, and was asleep almost before his head hit the pillow.

Dirk awoke with a start.

It was pitch black, warm, and most disturbingly, it was *dry*. His heart pounded for a moment until he remembered what'd happened. He'd been shot, and forced to beach himself on a human's boat in order to get away from a pack of sharks set on devouring him. His fingers reached over his shoulder to touch the bandage.

Harper.

Harper had fixed him, then let him sleep. A wry smile curved Dirk's lips. *Harper saw me shift, and thinks he's crazy*, he remembered. *Kept calling me a delusion. Where is he?*

Dirk scooted to the edge of the bed, hissing at the pain in his shoulder. He'd need to be careful of it for several days, at least until it scabbed over. He couldn't go back into the water until it healed, or the sharks would be on him again.

His lips spread in a slow smile as he realized he'd need to stay with Harper until then. Harper was a good-looking guy, and Dirk hadn't missed how Harper had been looking at him the night before. He might have a shoulder injury, but there wasn't anything at all wrong with the parts of him south of his navel, as his morning erection proudly showed.

Dirk slipped into the tiny head, sighing contentedly as he relieved himself. It was annoying to need to remember his potty training. Sharks went whenever the urge hit them, but he doubted Harper would be pleased if Dirk pissed on the floor.

He tried to remember what humans did in the morning. It'd been so long since he'd needed to do anything but swim, eat, and swim again, that he'd nearly forgotten. Shower. Use soap. Wash hair. Brush teeth. Oh, yeah, now he remembered. He found a new toothbrush in the sink's vanity, along with toothpaste, a bottle of shampoo and a bar of soap, and set to work, careful to keep his bandage as dry as possible.

He felt refreshed, but hungry. He had no clue where to find food on the ship, and went in search of Harper, instead.

Harper's stateroom was larger than the midship cabin, most of it taken up by a huge, king-sized bed. Harper looked lost lying in the middle of the huge bed, one arm tucked under tousled blonde hair, legs akimbo. He was naked, and Dirk took a moment to appreciate the view.

Harper was roughly the same size as Dirk, but more slender, not as muscular, though still firm. His skin was golden, nipples a rosy-pink, and the hair nesting his thoroughly delectable cock was a few shades darker than the hair on his head.

As if it knew it was the object of Dirk's attention, Harper's cock twitched, slowly filling. *Probably just his morning wood*, Dirk told himself, but it really made no difference. After being alone for so long, Dirk was achingly needy, and the sight of Harper's fine, nude body ignited a flame that refused to be doused.

Dirk climbed onto the mattress and slowly crawled up over Harper's legs until he reached Harper's groin. Lowering his face, he took a deep whiff, filling his lungs with the scent of musky male. His body responded immediately, hardening so quickly and forcefully that he gasped. He rubbed his erection against the inside of Harper's thigh, groaning softly as the hair on Harper's leg rasped the sensitive skin of his cock.

Harper's scent, powerful and masculine, was impossible to resist. Dirk lowered his head and flicked out his tongue, swirling it over the head of Harper's prick. His mouth filled with the taste of man, heady and strong, encouraging him to sample Harper more fully.

Harper moaned and shifted slightly. Dirk's gaze flicked up toward Harper's face, watching him carefully. "Should I stop?" he asked in a soft voice.

"No," Harper replied, without opening his eyes. "If this is a wet dream, it's the best one ever. More."

"Not a dream," Dirk replied, then bent his head again and took Harper fully into his mouth. He sucked hard, taking Harper in deep, his hips continuing to rub his cock against Harper's leg. The friction was unbearably sweet.

"Not a dream," Harper repeated. "Oh, fuck! That feels so good. More, Dirk. Want more."

"Mmmhmm." Dirk hummed around Harper's cock, and felt Harper's fingers twisting his hair. Suddenly, frottage wasn't nearly enough. He needed more, and needed it now. He released Harper's cock, ignoring Harper's protest, and scooted up, straddling, Harper's thighs.

Holding their cocks together, he wrapped both his hands around them, and began stroking them in tandem. His hands felt good, but the hot, silken skin of Harper's cock against his felt even better. His balls filled, belly tightening as his orgasm began to boil up.

He shot first, bolts of white-hot pleasure searing him. He nearly missed Harper's release, but he heard Harper's voice in a wordless cry, and felt the shudders running through Harper's body.

Feeling as boneless as the jellyfish he sometimes shared the water with, Dirk eased himself down onto the mattress next to Harper, draped an arm over Harper's stomach, and sighed happily.

This is going to be a very pleasant convalescence, if not a particularly restful one, he thought with a grin.

Harper lay still under the weight of Dirk's arm, blissfully content -- for about a half a minute before he was faced with an undeniable truth. He wasn't crazy.

Dirk was real.

Harper could feel Dirk's warm breath on his cheek, the heat from his body. Harper's stomach was still wet with a mixture of their seed, his body still recovering from the power of his orgasm.

The shark-man was real.

He waited for the terror that should come on the heels of such a discovery, but none came. He wasn't frightened; hell, he wasn't even nervous. He was interested, yes. Fascinated, in fact, but not scared. Not at all.

It was confusing and liberating, all at once. He turned his head to look at Dirk. "Who are you, really? How can you do what you do?"

Dirk smiled at him, and gave him a light squeeze. "I'm glad you finally came around. I told you before -- I'm a shapeshifter."

"Shapeshifters are myths. Fairytales," Harper said, shaking his head. There had to be another explanation.

"Are we going to go there again? I'm not a hallucination. I'm not some weird government experiment gone AWOL. I was born just as human as you are, but when I hit puberty, I Changed."

"Wow," Harper said, lying back against the pillow. He stared up at the ceiling for a minute, letting it all sink in. "Are there more like you?"

"Yeah. Well, not sharks...I haven't met any of those. I met a few people who could shift into other forms, though." Dirk's eyes were guarded, as if he expected Harper to freak out again.

Harper never felt more calm, though. Maybe it was the sex, or the fact that Dirk seemed like a genuinely nice guy, but he wasn't afraid at all. "Well, you can't go back in the ocean until that wound is healed. You can stay here with me. I was heading down to the islands for a vacation."

Dirk looked surprised, and not a little relieved. "You mean it? I was going to ask, but I wasn't sure if you'd want a freak hanging around."

"Hey, you're not a freak. You're different, sure, but kind of cool. I think the shark thing is pretty incredible."

Dirk laughed, then he waggled an eyebrow suggestively. "If you think *that's* something, wait until you hear this – my shark form has two dicks."

"Aw, you're shitting me."

"Nope, it's true. Most male sharks do. They both work, too."

"Yeah? Well, as intriguing as that sounds, I think I'm going to have skip the experience, since I have a feeling the two penises come in a package deal with a mouthful of wicked teeth."

Dirk laughed again. "True, true. Too bad, though. They would probably make for some incredible sex."

A thought suddenly struck Harper, and it was his turn to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"I finally caught a fish, and he's a whopper," he said, and laughed even more at the bewildered expression on Dirk's handsome face. "You're the big fish that *didn't* get away,"

Stray
by Kiernan Kelly

To a man like Ty, luck was no lady. As a matter of fact, the word he had in mind for her at the moment wasn't one he could mention in polite company. Then again, since Ty rarely *kept* polite company, what he chose to call his luck -- or lack thereof -- was sort of a moot point, anyway.

He leaped over an upended trashcan, skidded around a sharp corner and down a long, narrow, darkened alley, only to find that it dead-ended at a fifteen-foot high chain link fence. He jumped up, trying to scale it, but fell short of the top. He landed on all four feet, unbroken, but cornered.

That figures - a dead end, and in more ways than one. It's the story of my life. Ty twisted his body around to face his attackers, a warning growl rumbling low in his chest. He bared his teeth, tail swishing ominously side-to-side, his muscles tensed for a fight. *Come on, you bastards. Let's rumba.*

"Do you see it?" A man's voice floated through the night, along with the unmistakable sound of a rifle cracking as a shell slid home.

"I don't see anything but a whole lot of fucking dark. Where's the light?"

"Here."

Another click and a brilliant beam swept the alley. Ty blinked against his will as the light flashed in his sensitive eyes. He snarled, pacing back and forth in front of the wall, trying to outmaneuver the flashlight beam. Keeping low to the pavement, he zigzagged across the narrow space, but as the light grew near, it grew brighter and larger, until it eventually was inescapable.

Two men crept down the alley toward him, both dressed in white overalls. One carried the flashlight and a pole with a dangling loop of rope at one end, the other, a rifle.

"I didn't believe the call when it came in, but they were right. What the hell is it...a lion?"

"No, that's not a lion. That's a jaguar. I saw one in the zoo when I took my kids last summer."

Yeah, and I can see that you two are a pair of jackasses who should never have been allowed to breed. Do you see any fucking spots? I'm a panther, you moron. Come get me! Ty snarled, the vicious sound bouncing off the walls of the buildings, echoing back to him.

Was this what it had finally come down to? Shot to death in an garbage-strewn alley by a pair of animal control workers? So be it. If he was going to eat a bullet, he was going to have a bite of dogcatcher to chase it down. With another snarl even more ferocious than the first, he gathered his legs under him to leap.

A shot rang out, the sound far softer than he would have expected, and almost instantly he felt a burning pain in his left shoulder. The impact threw him off balance and he stumbled, his hind legs sliding under his body. *Ha!. You couldn't hit the broadside of a barn with both hands and a sledgehammer. You winged me!*

He struggled to his feet, but his body felt like a concrete pylon supported by toothpicks. His legs trembled violently, straining under his weight. His vision blurred, darkness graying the edges of the world. Swaying, he shook his head, trying to clear it. *What the hell?*

Ty's last thought as he fell heavily to the ground and rolled over onto his side, was that if it weren't for bad luck, he'd have none at all.

*

A headache that threatened to split his skull wide open was pounding at his temples when Ty awoke. It took several minutes for him to get his bearings, to make sense of his surroundings. The last he remembered, he was facing down the barrel of a rifle in a dark alley.

Evidently, the dogcatchers hadn't finished the job. He was still alive.

However, the moment he realized where he was, he fervently wished that wasn't the case.

He was lying on a cold concrete slab fenced in on all four sides by thick metal bars that reached all the way up to a twelve foot ceiling. A pair of large aluminum bowls sat to one side of him. One held water, the other was empty.

Beyond the bars, he could see a long row of metal cabinets, a stainless steel sink, a coiled garden hose, and a Formica counter. A single swivel stool sat before it, and an examination table was off to one side. Overhead, florescent lights flickered. He could hear animal noises coming from outside the room. Another big cat, a tiger perhaps, roared, and what he thought might be an elephant trumpeted.

A zoo. I'm in a goddamn zoo.

Shit.

All right, calm down. Take stock. Aside from his capture, his next most pressing problem was the soreness in his left shoulder. Twisting his head, he licked the sore spot. No hole.

No blood. They'd only tranquilized him. *Damn it. They didn't even allow me the dignity of a decent scar.*

Dragging himself to his feet, his stiff shoulder protesting his movement, head still pounding, Ty limped to the bars, and shifted. Spaced at four-inch intervals, the gaps between them were too narrow for his head to slip through. The door's deadbolt slid into a latch on the wall, and his arm wasn't quite long enough to reach it.. *Shit! I'm fucking stuck in here? Man, my life just keeps getting better and better.* He shifted back into his panther-form before someone came in and found a naked human in the locked cage instead of the panther.

Pacing back and forth in front of the bars, he snarled his frustration.

An hour or so passed before anyone entered the room in which Ty was being held. He'd spent the time pacing out the stiffness in his shoulder, going over various escape scenarios in his mind. Unfortunately, none seemed particularly viable. The only way out was for someone to open the cage door from the outside. Since it occurred to Ty that no one would open the door to the cage unless they sedated Ty first, that presented him with a problem.

He couldn't let them sedate him again. He couldn't risk being unconscious and possibly shifting spontaneously. He'd have to think of something else, but what? No one in their right mind would enter a cage with a fully alert, wild animal.

But...what if the animal *wasn't* wild? What if they thought that Ty was tame? A trained animal, perhaps, or someone's pet? Could he convince the vet that it was safe to enter without tranquilizing him?

He'd have to -- it was the only way he could think of to escape without giving himself away, and he had to get free soon, before the poachers killed again. He'd tracked the bastards from his home in the Everglades.

There were precious few full-blooded Florida panthers living in the wild without poachers decimating their already too-small numbers. Ty felt a connection with them, being part panther himself, and he was furious that some pathetic humans killed them for sport or profit despite the law.

The straw that broke the panther's back came one day while he was in his animal form, lounging on a tree limb, minding his own damn business, and one of the poachers took a shot at him. The bullet whizzed by, close enough to his head for him to feel the breeze it made. After that, it became personal. He began to hunt the hunters.

He'd tracked them to their lair in the city, but lost them in the confusing mix of smells. Car exhaust, thousands of people, garbage, sewage, and a number of other strong odors had overpowered the poachers' scent trail.

Then the dogcatchers had found him.

He had to get out, and soon, before his secret was discovered. Pretending to be tame, getting his keeper to trust him seemed to be the only way. Once out of the cage, he was sure he could find a way out of the building. From there, it would only be a matter of finding a hiding spot in the zoo in which to wait. After hours, he could shift, snag a t-shirt and shorts from one of the gift shops, and be on his way.

By the time the door cracked open and someone in a white lab coat slipped inside, Ty had his plan hammered out. He lay down, resting his head on his front paws, watching. No overt moves, nothing that could be construed as even vaguely threatening. It wasn't easy. Part of Ty's nature was that of the beast, particularly when in his panther-form. He instinctively wanted to attack anyone unfamiliar, defend his territory, even if said territory was only a cage. But he could do it. He *had* to do it.

Digging down deep, fighting against his instinct, he purred.

The vet didn't even glance in his direction. He walked over to the countertop, sitting on the tall stool, his back to the cage.

Ty cocked his head. *Hello? Hey, you in the white coat! Look over here at the cute, cuddly kitty! I'm sweet, just like an overgrown housecat. I'm even housebroken! Goddamn it! Look at me!* He rolled over onto his back, exposing his soft underbelly, paws batting playfully at the air.

The vet switched on his computer, humming softly under his breath, blithely oblivious to the show Ty was putting on right behind him.

If panthers could roll their eyes, Ty's would've been spinning around in their sockets. *What do I have to do to get this guy's attention? Tap dance?* He heaved himself to his feet, and rubbed his body against the bars of the cage, purring as loudly as possible. *If I have to keep this up too long, I'll have laryngitis when I shift back.*

"Let's see," the vet said, fingers flying over the computer's keyboard. "American panther, also known as cougar, puma, and mountain lion; member of the Felidae family. Territorial and reclusive," he said, as if reading from the screen. "Okay, now tell me something I don't already know." His fingers tapped across the keyboard again. Ty could see the computer screen flickering as the vet brought up another site of information. "Ah, here we go. Florida Panther. Endangered, according the Florida State Division of Wildlife. Cool. I get to release you back into the wild. No zoo life for you, pal. Studs like you need to be free to increase the herd, so to speak."

Increase the herd my ass! I don't swing that way, and even if I did, I'm not into furry, Ty thought smugly. *I am strictly a human-lover.* He remembered his plan, and purred again.

Finally, the vet turned and looked at Ty. “Magnificent,” he said, his warm brown eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled. “So, how’d you end up in the city? Follow your nose to the Dumpster behind McDonald’s? Gonna have to let you sleep for a while so that I can examine you, big guy.”

Oh no. No more tranks, Ty thought, watching the vet stand and begin to lay instruments out on the countertop. He whined, thrusting a paw through the bars of the cage.

The vet didn’t seem to notice his submissive behavior. Instead, he spiked a handful of fresh beef with what Ty assumed was a tranquilizer, and approached the cage. “Okay, big guy, time for lunch,” he said, tossing the meat through the bars into the empty silver bowl. “Chow down.”

Ty crossed the cage, standing as far from the tainted meat as he could get, but the smell of the raw meat called to his empty stomach like a siren’s song. *No way.* He was *not* eating it, even if he had to starve himself to death. His belly rumbled in defiance, every ounce of his panther half urging him to binge while food was available.

No! No food. No! Bad kitty, he berated himself.

“Come on, pussycat. You must be hungry. Take a bite,” the vet cajoled. He stuck his foot inside the cage, rattling the bowl that held the meat. Ty knew by his posture that the vet was ready to jump back at the first sign that Ty was going to move.

Bring me something edible and I will, he thought, sitting down.

“Oh, you’re an obstinate one, huh? Geez, I’d hate to have to shoot you to trank you. You’ve already been through that once in the last twenty four hours,” the vet said.

Hey, in that case, here’s an idea...you let me out, I’ll change into a man, and I’ll buy you dinner, Ty said. Of course, what came out was a low, rumbling growl, which set him ten steps back in the whole tamed kitty plan he had going. He made a mental note to kick himself when he had feet again.

“You know, those guys with the guns love shooting things. Love it way too much, if you ask me. Come on, don’t make me call them,” the vet said, ignoring Ty’s outburst.

Ty marveled at how the guy could have a running, one-sided conversation with an animal. Kind of nice, having someone talk to him as if he could understand. In his panther form, Ty was used to people either screaming and running away, or screaming and trying to shoot him. In either case, screaming was a big part of the reaction.

Talking was a nice change of pace.

Plus, the vet had a great voice. Not a baritone, not a tenor, but right square in the alto range. His voice was pleasant, and soothing, with a heavy drawl. *Must be from down*

here, somewhere south of the Mason-Dixon Line, Ty thought. Probably not a native Floridian – there are so few of them, they should be an endangered species. He's most likely a transplant from one of the other southern states.

"Come on, big guy. Just a taste, huh?" The vet rattled the food dish again.

The meaty smell drifted across the cage to tickle Ty's nose again. It smelled delicious. His nose couldn't detect the presence of any chemicals. *No! I watched him dose it. It's the animal equivalent of a Mickey Finn. I am not going to let instinct override common sense. I'm not!*

One large paw took a step in the direction of the bowl.

Ty began to salivate, his stomach rumbling loudly.

Stop! Don't touch it!

His panther-self wasn't listening to his human half at all. It was hungry, and there was food available that he didn't even have to catch and kill first. *Eat*, his panther insisted. *Now*.

Had he been able to shift, he would have easily been able to subjugate his panther, but in his animal-form, with his predicament already precarious at best, instinct won out over common sense.

He ate.

Three big bites emptied the bowl. He'd no sooner begun lapping at the water in the other bowl than his head started buzzing with a peculiar fuzzy feeling, and his vision grew blurry.

His last thought before the darkness took him was a hope that he wouldn't fall face first into the water dish and drown.

Ty blinked awake, his vision slowly clearing. The first thing he noticed was that he was still in his cage.

The second was that he was in his human form.

He didn't know which discovery upset him more.

As he looked out between the bars of his cage and saw the vet sitting on his swivel stool, staring at him intently, he decided the second was definitely more perturbing.

"You're finally awake, huh? I was a little worried. I didn't know how the tranquilizer I used would affect you. I've never sedated a...whatever-you-are before," the vet said.

"You're taking this awfully well," Ty said. His voice felt sandpaper from disuse. He hadn't spoken in his human form for quite a while.

"Yeah, well, you didn't see my reaction when you first...did that thing you do. I nearly wet myself."

"I shifted. I'm a shapeshifter," Ty explained. He shook his head, trying to clear it of the last cobwebs. "Sorry to be the cause of your incontinence. Now let me out of here."

"Um, no. I think not." The vet stood up, and approached the cage. He squatted down, putting himself at eye level with Ty. "How can you do what you do? What *are* you?"

"I told you already. I'm a shapeshifter. I'm also human, and you can't keep me here against my will."

"Humans don't morph from a big cat into a man."

"This human does."

The vet grunted, clearly frustrated. "Do you have a name?"

"Of course, I have a name." Ty retorted, pouring a good deal of sarcasm into his voice. *Stupid vet*. "Didn't your mother name *you* when you born?"

"Well, is it a State secret, or are you going to tell me? What is it? Fluffy? Snowball? Boots?"

"Oh, you're a funny guy for somebody who makes their living by shoving their fingers up animal butts."

"I also do neutering. Don't forget that," the vet snapped. "Now, I asked you your name."

Ty winced. "Okay, okay, you win. Keep your scalpel to yourself. I'm Tyler. Who are you?"

"Matthew Freeman, DVM. How is it that you can change your physical shape like that? Are you...from this planet?"

"*Aliens*? Really? Let me guess...you're one of those Star Trek people who go to conventions wearing tin foil hats, right?" Ty shook his head. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes for a moment. He had the beginnings of what promised to be the mother of all headaches. "I'm just as human as you are, Doc, and to answer your first question, some people are double-jointed, some are colorblind, and some shapeshift."

Matthew gasped. "There are more like you? How many?"

Ty rolled his eyes, despite the throbbing in his head. "How am I supposed to know? I don't keep a running tally. It would be like asking me how many people in the world have AB negative blood type. It's rare, but I have no idea how many people have it."

"Are they all panthers?"

"Do all vets have brown eyes?" This one did, Ty noticed. They were the color of hot cocoa. Pretty, in a masculine way. He shrugged off his momentary lapse from sanity. "Look, will you please let me out of here? I was doing something really important when those dogcatchers decided to use me for target practice."

Matthew fell silent for all of about three seconds. "Can you reproduce with the real version of your animal forms? My God, think what you could do for the animal husbandry business! What else do your people change into besides panthers?"

"Whoa, back up, Doc. First, I believe I've already stated more than once that I'm just as human as you are. Would *you* like to make it with a real panther? Wait, don't answer that. If you would, then you have bigger problems than a captive shapeshifter in your office. Secondly, I don't have any idea what animals other people shift into...I've only met a handful of people like me in my life. A couple of them were wolves, and one was a bear. There was a tiger, an eagle, and a few others, so I think it's safe to say there's a variety of forms out there. Now, let me out!"

Matthew looked pensive for a moment. "How do I know you're not dangerous? I can't let you out if there's a chance you might hurt someone."

Ty sighed heavily and sat down. He thrust his hand through his hair, wincing as the throbbing behind his eyes increased. "I'm not a danger to anybody. I'm just me, Doc. Listen, do you have anything for a headache? I've got real a corker. I feel like my eyes are going to pop out and roll across the floor."

"It's probably a residual effect of the tranquilizer. Are you allergic to anything? I'll get you some Tylenol."

Ty's mind worked rapidly as he watched Matthew withdraw a bottle from one of the cabinets, and shake a couple of white pills into the palm of his hand. When Matthew approached the cage and thrust his hand inside to drop the pills on the floor, Ty took action.

Moving quickly, he shifted and launched himself at the bars, grabbing Matthew's arm between his jaws. Matthew screamed and struggled wildly, but Ty exerted just enough force to hold him firm without breaking the skin. After a minute or two, Matthew settled down, although his eyes remained wide with terror.

Ty waited a solid five minutes before letting go. He spent the time studying Matthew's face.

Matthew wasn't handsome, Ty decided. Not in an Abercrombie-model sort of way, but his face was pleasant and open. His eyes were really his best feature, big, brown, and honest. His nose was slightly crooked, and his mouth, generous. He hadn't shaved recently; his beard was coming in, a shade darker than his auburn hair.

When Matthew seemed to conclude that he wasn't going to be eaten, and relaxed a bit, Ty let him go and shifted back. Matthew stumbled backwards, as if startled by his sudden release.

"See? If I was dangerous, if I wasn't in complete control even in my panther-form, I would've gnawed your arm off by now, Doc," Ty said.

Matthew's opposite hand slid up his arm, as if to check that it was still there and not somewhere in Ty's digestive tract. "Okay, point taken."

"So, are you going to let me out?"

When Matthew nodded, Ty felt his first tickle of hope since the moment he'd woken up inside the cage in his panther-form. He watched Matthew walk to the door, and heard him slide the bolt open.

"You're not going to get far, you know," Matthew said. He'd jumped to the other side of the room after opening the door, putting the examination table between them. "Naked, I mean. You can't run around the zoo a panther, and you can't exactly blend in with the crowds outside without clothes. You'll be taken away again, except this time it'll probably be to a jail cell. Good luck trying that arm-biting-stunt on a prison guard. You'll probably get the chair."

Ty looked down at himself. He'd forgotten that he was clothing-challenged at the moment. He cupped himself, although it was clearly unnecessary. Matthew had already gotten a good, long look at everything he owned. "Damn it! You're right. What am I going to do? I really need to get out of here."

"Well, I guess I could get something for you to wear from the gift shop," Matthew said.

Ty was surprised by the offer. He'd never expected Matthew's help, particularly since Matthew was still obviously so leery of him. "Thank you. That'd be great."

"Yeah, well...I can't have a naked guy in here when the night shift shows up. It'd be bad for my reputation."

"Oh. Afraid folk will think you're gay, huh?" Ty felt a surge of resentment threatening to destroy his previous good spirits.

To his surprise, Matthew laughed, although his cheeks reddened. "No, that isn't it at all. Everyone around here swears I'm some sort of asexual workaholic. Finding a naked *anybody* in here with me would shatter their whole belief system."

Ty chuckled, his smile returning. "Well, we can't have that, now can we? Now, about those clothes..."

"Yeah. I'll be right back. Lock the door after I leave, and try not to think about eating my staff while I'm gone." He said with a cheeky wink and a grin as he closed the door behind him.

Ty stared at the closed door, one eyebrow raised as he considered the implications of the good doctor's parting double entendre.

"So where is it you're in such a hurry to get to?"

Ty pulled his new gym shorts up, and grimaced. They barely covered him to mid-thigh. "Didn't they have adult-sized shorts in that store?"

Matthew grinned. "Those are adult sized. I can't help it if you've got abnormally long legs."

"My legs are average length. These shorts are made for kids!" Ty insisted. He turned around, peering into the small mirror on the wall near the cabinets, trying to get a better look at himself. "The whole idea of getting me clothing was so that I'd blend in with the crowd, remember?"

"You'll blend. Nobody gives a damn what you're wearing, as long as you're wearing *something*," Matthew said. "This is Central Florida, Tourist Central. You could dress in lederhosen and no one would bat an eye."

"Yeah, well, I feel ridiculous."

"You look hot."

Ty spun around, blinking at Matthew. "Did the asexual doctor just call me hot?"

"I said my *staff* thinks I'm asexual. I didn't say it was true."

Ty's lips curled into a smile before he remembered who he was and what he had to do. His plans did not include the good doctor. "I have to go."

To his chagrin, Matthew stood up and blocked the door. "I asked you what it was you had to do that was so important. I think I deserve an answer. After all, I could've left you in the cage, or let you run outside naked and possibly end up in jail. Better yet, you could've been front page news if I'd called the papers."

Ty sighed. "Okay, okay. There are these men, poachers, who've been killing panthers in the Everglades. It's not a big ring, maybe three or four men. I followed them to the city, and picked up their scent, but lost it again just before the dogcatchers showed up. I have to find them again."

"Why? What's it to you?"

"You're a vet! Doesn't it bother you that people are killing animals on the Endangered Species List?"

"Of course it does. That doesn't explain why you've made it into a vendetta. You could get killed, Ty. Men like that play for keeps. Why didn't you just report them?"

"Do I look stupid? I *did* report them. The Fish and Wildlife people haven't been able to find them. The bastards killed another panther last week, and took a shot at me. *That* made it personal."

"You make it a habit to hang out in the Everglades in your panther form? You said -- most emphatically as I recall -- that you were just as human as I am. Humans don't spend their time living as panthers in the Everglades."

Damn him for having a good memory, Ty thought. "I *am* human. I just...look, my life hasn't been easy, okay? You want to know the truth? I've been out on my own since I was fourteen. My folks weren't shifters, and...well, let's just say they didn't take too well to their son shifting into a big cat in the middle of their living room. It's been hard being alone all the time."

"You said you found other shifters..."

"I did. Up in Wyoming. There's a ranch owned by a pair of shifters, and they welcome strays into their pack. I stayed awhile. They're good people, but that life isn't for me. I don't like the cold, for one, and believe me, it gets fucking *frosty* in Wyoming! Secondly, I don't take orders from other alphas very well." He shrugged. "It just didn't work out, and I left. I came back down here, and have been living as a panther ever since. It's easier that way. No need to worry that somebody might discover what I am, you know? Well...until now, anyway."

Ty watched curiously as Matthew shrugged out of his white lab coat, hanging it neatly on a peg by the door. "What are you doing?"

"Going with you. Two sets of eyes are better than one, and you aren't familiar with the city. I'll drive," Matthew said, as if it were already decided.

"Oh, no. This isn't your fight."

"I'm a vet. Poachers *are* my fight."

"I work alone!"

"Not any more." Matthew's smile looked smug.

"I said, no!" Ty snarled, baring his teeth.

"Bite me."

"That's always an option."

To Ty's irritation, Matthew laughed at him, opened the door and stepped outside, fully expecting Ty to follow.

To Ty's amazement, he did exactly that.

Matthew drove an Explorer, which gave Ty plenty of room in the back to shrug out of his clothing and shift if needed. He'd explained that he could pick the scent up easier as his cat than in his weaker, human form. At the moment, he rode shotgun, peering out the window. Luckily, the SUV's windows were heavily tinted. Ty could see out, but no one could see in.

"Where were you when you lost the trail?" Matthew asked.

Ty thought hard for a moment. "I remember a gas station on one corner, and a fast food joint on the other."

Matthew laughed wryly. "Well, that describes every street corner in town. Try to be more specific."

"I remember a park nearby. It had a large lake in the center with people peddling big plastic swan boats on it."

"Ah, Lake Eola. Okay, that narrows it down some. I'll start by circling the lake. Crack your window open, shift, and see if you can smell anything."

It amazed Ty at how easily Matthew had accepted his unique abilities. He pushed the thought aside. There'd be time enough to think about it later. He had bigger worries right

now. He slipped into the back of the SUV, climbing over the front seat while trying not to kick Matthew in the head, stripped down, and shifted. His cat, while large, made a much more graceful return to the front seat.

"Hey." Matthew's voice was even-toned, but Ty could see his knuckles whiten on the steering wheel. "Everything okay?"

Ty responded by licking the side of Matthew's face to put him at ease, then putting his nose to the slightly opened window.

"Ew, panther-slobber," Matthew said, but Ty could hear the relief in his voice, and felt the tension and fear dissipate from the air. He would've smiled if he could; Matthew might've accepted Ty's abilities, but that didn't mean he was overly comfortable with Ty in his panther form.

He turned his attention back to scenting the air and the myriad of smells it carried. As they passed a fast food place, he could smell burned meat, onions, and grease. The unmistakable odor of sex and the sickly-sweet smell of marijuana came from a dive motel. There was the stench of rancid food from a dumpster; cloying perfume and stringent ammonia emanating from a beauty salon.

Matthew turned up one street and down another, slowly covering a purposeful grid around the lake. He stopped once to fill up the tank, and Ty thought he might get sick from the overpowering smell of gasoline that filled the SUV.

Full dark was upon them now, but Ty hardly needed the streetlights to see. His night vision in his panther-form was perfect. Still, he couldn't see or smell anything that might lead him to the poachers.

"Look, Ty, I think we should call it a night. We're not going to find them on the streets at this hour. They're getting ready to roll up the sidewalks. It's closing time for all these businesses."

Ty glanced at Matthew, then stuck his nose back out the window. *Not giving up yet. Keep going*, he thought. Sweet and sour warred in the smells coming from a Chinese food restaurant. Delicious beefy smells from a steakhouse set his to rumbling. He hadn't eaten since he'd woofed down the tranquilizer-spiked beef earlier in the day.

"Come on, Ty. You're hungry -- I can hear your stomach from here. I am, too. Let's go back to my place. We can eat, get a good night's sleep, and start again early tomorrow."

His place? Ty hadn't considered that Matthew might be willing to put Ty up for the night. The thought of a hot meal and a soft bed sent a shiver rippling across his skin. He leaned over, licked Matthew's face again, then squeezed over the seats into the back. After he'd shifted and dressed, he returned to the front seat. "Thank you," he said quietly.

"Don't mention it."

"No, I mean it. Thanks for...not freaking out on me when I shifted, and for letting me out of the cage. Thanks for driving me around. Thanks for offering to feed me --"

"I get it! I get it! Enough already. I didn't offer you a kidney, just dinner."

Ty scratched his head. "I know, but still..."

"I hope you don't mind burgers, because I have nothing in the house worth eating. I'll have to do a drive-by at Mickey D's on the way home."

"Burgers are good."

They drove in silence the rest of the way. Ty's stomach refused to hush, growling even louder when Matthew pulled the take-out bag into the SUV and the air filled with the smell of Big Macs. The last half mile to Matthew's house seemed to take forever.

Matthew's house was a small, unassuming ranch in a quiet residential neighborhood, on a cobblestone street lined with fully mature trees dripping Spanish moss. Ty followed him to the front door, practically salivating after the McDonald's bag.

When Matthew opened the door, they were greeted by a cacophony of barks, meows, and birdsong.

Matthew, it seemed, liked to take his work home with him. He had a full menagerie of animals living under his roof, most of which were recovering from some injury or other. Ty counted six dogs and at least four cats. A parrot, a pair of lovebirds, and a squirrel resided in cages in the living room. As he followed Matthew into the kitchen, he passed several fish tanks and terrariums filled with exotic fish, snakes, and lizards.

"Is this a house, or a fucking ark?" Ty asked as he took a seat at the kitchen table. He reached for the McDonald's bag, and helped himself to a Big Mac, and fries.

"I do animal rescue. I bring 'em home, fix 'em up, and set 'em free. I get the hard cases, though, the ones no one else can help."

Ty ate his burger in three bites, and reached for another. A large dog of some hairy and unidentifiable heritage plopped his head on Ty's lap, looking up at him with sorrowful eyes. "Hey, back off, dog. I'm a cat-person."

"His name is Clancy, and he was found in an alley downtown. Poor guy was so badly mistreated, I doubted he'd live through the night, but he's stronger than he looks. Stubborn, too. Down, Clancy! Behave yourself; we have company."

Clancy immediately lay down, although his big, brown eyes remained trained on Ty.

"You should be honored. He snarls at practically everybody else, except me. I had to adopt him, because no one else would have him. That's how I got all my pets. They were all strays whom nobody wanted."

"He only loves me for my Big Mac," Ty said. "After the food is gone, he'll probably try to chase me up a tree."

Matthew laughed; it occurred to Ty once again how warm and contagious his laugh was, and how it made his brown eyes sparkle. Ty's mouth went dry, his body tightening as, now that his hunger was assuaged, other needs began to make themselves known. His panther growled, recognizing in Matthew a possible mate, however temporary.

Matthew must have noticed the change in Ty's demeanor, because he grew flustered. "Uh, after you're done eating, I'll show you where you can shower and bunk down."

Ty tossed Clancy his last bit of burger, and stood up. He was having trouble containing himself; it'd been so long -- too long -- since he'd last taken a lover. The last man he'd slept with had been a one night stand up at the ranch in Wyoming. Ty couldn't quite remember his name. Ted...Fred...Ed, something along those lines. He was a nice enough guy, and no more interested in anything permanent than Ty had been. They'd had a couple of great nights together, then painlessly parted ways.

He hadn't taken anyone to his bed since, and deep within him, a hunger awoke that was sharper and more unrelenting than the one he'd felt for food. It burned inside him, making him feel nervous and twitchy. He refused to act on it; he had no idea if Matthew would be open to such an advance, and he didn't want to shatter the fragile beginnings of friendship he'd felt grow between them. He struggled to keep the panther caged, and his baser instincts, tamed.

Still, Ty couldn't help but follow closely behind Matthew, beguiled by the warm, spicy scent on his skin. When Matthew stopped short in front of a door, Ty ran smack into him.

The panther pressed against Ty's skin, snarling in frustration. It wanted to mate; it couldn't understand why Ty was attracted to Matthew, yet refused to act. Their collision, however brief, was the impetus the panther needed to exert its will. Ty backed Matthew up against a wall, claiming his mouth in an urgent, bruising kiss.

With a roar that wasn't completely human, he tore himself away. "I'm sorry," he gasped, his voice rough and low. "I'm sorry."

"What's going on? What the hell was *that*?" Matthew asked, reaching for Ty.

Ty shrugged away from his touch. He couldn't trust himself to endure it without pawing at Matthew and making a fool of himself again. "Nothing. Momentary lapse from sanity."

Pretend it didn't happen, okay?" He turned away, trying to put distance between them, as if a few mere feet of space would cool the fiery need raging inside him.

"A man flattening me against a wall and kissing me like he's ready to swallow me whole is not something I can just forget about, Ty. What's going on?" Matthew pressed. To Ty's chagrin, Matthew followed him, sticking to him like a shadow. "Ty? I asked you a question. I deserve an answer."

Ty turned on him, his lip curled over his teeth. He was holding it together by the most slender of threads. "You asked before if I was dangerous. I lied when I said I'm not. I am fucking *deadly* right now. I almost took you by force, here in the hallway of your own house! Okay? Is that explanation enough?"

"I wasn't fighting you off, as I recall."

Ty blinked, but then shook his head. "No, you were in shock. You didn't expect me to attack you like that, and you froze up--"

"You're wrong. I didn't expect it, because I never thought someone like you would be interested in me. I'm sort of...well, ordinary, compared to you...compared to *anybody*, really." There was a soft smile tilting Matthew's lips, and his hand reached out, his knuckles gently grazing Ty's cheek. Matthew's touch seared Ty to the very marrow of his bones. "I didn't fight you because I wanted you, too."

It was the touch of a lover, a mate.

His panther purred with an odd mix of sharp arousal and sweet contentment.

"Ordinary is good. Ordinary is something I've always wanted to be," Ty whispered. "Oh, God, Matthew! Please, don't tease me. If you don't want this, you have to leave me alone. I can't control myself! I've never felt like this, like..."

"Like what?"

"Like if I don't have you, right now, right here, I'll die." Simply said, the truth sounded desperately pathetic to Ty, and he blushed, something he rarely, if ever, did.

Matthew answered with a trace of humor in his voice. "Well, as a vet, I certainly can't have you die on me. It would be bad for business."

Ty swallowed Matthew's last word as Matthew leaned in and kissed him. After that, there was no holding back, not anymore. A long, low rumble vibrated in his chest, and he grabbed Matthew's face with both hands. He smashed their lips together, his tongue sweeping Matthew's lips, looking for a way inside. When Matthew gave him an opening, he took it.

Hands clutched at his ass, squeezing, making his cock jump eagerly. He ground his hips against Matthew's, pleased to feel a responding hardness pressing against him. Matthew's hand insinuated itself between them, petting, stroking him through the fabric of his shorts. Within moments, they were both breathless.

"Bedroom? You have one, right?" Ty gasped when the need for air finally forced them apart.

"Yeah, here. In here," Matthew answered, nodding toward the door. "Bed. In here."

Ty shouldered the door open, pulling Matthew inside. He was already pulling Matthew's shirt over his head, needing to see Matthew's skin, to feel it. He grinned at the chest he revealed. Not as wide as his own, Matthew's chest was liberally dusted with auburn curls. His flat nipples were the color of warm amber, the tiny nubs tightened. A line of hair divided his stomach, disappearing behind the waistband of his pants.

Ty was suddenly desperate for Matthew to shed those pants, to see what lay at the end of his treasure trail. He clawed at the button and zipper in such a frenzy that Matthew laughed and backed away.

"Let me do it! I don't want this ruined by a zipper incident," he said, batting Ty's hands away. "And in case you haven't noticed, you still have clothes on. They might prove problematic later on, so I suggest you ditch them."

Ty grinned, and shimmied out of his t-shirt and shorts. He stood naked, watching with wide, keen eyes as Matthew stepped out of his khakis and underwear. *Oh, man. Beautiful man*, he thought, reaching for Matthew.

Matthew's cock was as hard as Ty's own. He could smell Matthew's arousal, the scent mixing with his in perfect balance, setting his blood on fire. He drew Matthew into another deep, soul kiss, rubbing their erections together.

He nearly came from the blissful contact of skin against skin. Only sheer will kept his orgasm at bay. He simply refused to have their interlude end so quickly.

After all, he had plans, which began with laying Matthew on the bed, and tasting every inch of him. He kissed Matthew's eyelids, cheeks, mouth, and throat; teased his perky amber nipples, each in their turn. He rubbed his face against the hair on Matthew's chest, and nosed the silky hair under his arms.

By the time he'd followed the treasure trail down over Michael's stomach to his cock, Michael was moaning and begging for more.

Which was perfect as far as Ty was concerned, because *more* was exactly what he had planned.

He wrapped his fingers around Matthew's girth, squeezing lightly as he flicked his tongue over the head. Nothing in his experience had prepared Ty for the full impact Matthew's flavor had on his senses; his entire body tightened, thrumming with renewed need. He took Matthew in fully, sucking greedily, enjoying the soft sounds Matthew made, and the way his body quivered with pleasure.

Then Matthew's hands pulled on Ty's hips, urging him into position, head to feet, and he moaned when he felt Matthew's mouth latch onto his cock. Shivers ran through him as Matthew's clever tongue drove him unerringly toward release.

He redoubled his efforts, sucking hard until he tasted bitter salt, and knew Matthew was going to come. He deep-throated Matthew then, taking him in until the head of Matthew's cock scraped the back of his throat...and purred.

Matthew's cry rang in Ty's ears as he shot, but it was soon lost, drowned out by the sound of a panther screaming in ecstasy.

Morning caught Ty riding shotgun again in Matthew's SUV. They'd gotten precious little sleep the night before, although Ty was hardly complaining. After their first quick, if satisfying, go-round, they'd made love again. The second time was longer, sweeter, gentler, but still full of passion. In fact, he'd never had such mind-blowing, ball-draining sex before; *exquisite* was really the only word that came close to an accurate description. He tired, sleepy, and was seriously tempted to forgo his search for the poachers in lieu of a few more hours of lying with Matthew in a boneless knot of arms and legs.

Matthew, ever the veterinarian with a heart of gold, wouldn't hear of it. "We have a chance to catch these guys, Ty! We have to try, before they kill any more panthers."

He was adamant, and Ty couldn't refuse him, especially after Matthew promised Ty a full body massage after the poachers were found, and the authorities alerted (he'd made Ty swear to leave the actual apprehension to the police).

They picked up nearly exactly where they'd left off the night before. Ty undressed in the back of the SUV, and shifted before climbing into the passenger seat and cracking open the window to catch the scent.

Up one street, down another, hours ticking by as they slowly covered the neighborhoods adjoining the park. Ty's stomach was rumbling again, and he was on the verge of telling Matthew it was time for lunch, when suddenly he tensed.

He'd caught something in the air, and took a deeper whiff, analyzing the information his nose picked up. It came from a Tex-Mex restaurant, and was the scent he'd been searching for -- the poachers, at least two of them. Stronger smells of beef, chicken, onions and peppers nearly disguised the scent, but it was there. Even now, a couple of days after the kill, the poachers still reeked of death.

Ty shifted, not caring that he was nude. "Wait, back up! They're in that restaurant back there." He rolled his window down all the way and practically climbed out of the SUV, craning his neck to see behind them.

Matthew grabbed his arm and pulled him back inside. "First, you're naked, it's broad daylight, and people might take umbrage to seeing your dangly bits hanging out of my window. Secondly, you promised to let the police handle it."

"Yeah, but I have to go inside to make sure it's them!"

"No, you don't."

"Yes, Matthew, I really do." Ty looked at him sternly. "You call the cops. I'm going in there, if for nothing else but to make sure it's them, and that they don't leave before the police show up."

"Ty..."

Ty wasn't listening. He once again climbed into the back seat, pulled on his shorts and t-shirt, and jumped out the back door, padding barefoot over the hot asphalt street to the sidewalk. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Matthew climbing out of the SUV, his cell phone held to his ear.

He centered his attention on the restaurant. It was obvious the owners had let the place go to seed. The windows were cracked, and the storefront looked grimy and unkempt. The door was propped open with a cinderblock; Ty could hear music playing inside. He took his cue from his panther, stalking his prey, approaching slowly, alert for movement and sound. His nose constantly tested the air; the poachers' scent grew stronger with every step he took.

Inside the restaurant, a long counter and a few swivel barstools stood to one side. A grease-coated grill sat behind it. A couple of square tables and half a dozen chairs were grouped on the other side. The only people in the place were a few old men, a balding cook in a stained apron, and a tired-looking waitress. Conversation halted and they all looked at Ty when he walked inside.

None of the people there smelled like the poachers, yet the scent was still in the room. He took a few hesitant steps toward the back of the restaurant, and spotted a door half-hidden behind stacks of boxes.

"Hey! You can't go back there!" The cook yelled, but Ty ignored him, moving purposely toward the door. He yanked the door open and gagged, nearly overcome by the smell of death that hit him full in the face.

The room was small and stank of decay and chemicals. Panther pelts in various stages of tanning were stretched out over large frames. Leather necklaces adorned with canine tooth pendants hung from a pegboard on one wall. Skulls and other bones boiled in a vat in one corner. A large butcher-block table held the carcass of a big cat, gutted and half-skinned.

Four men looked up from various tasks, startled by Ty's intrusion. Even if he hadn't caught them red-handed, he'd have known them anywhere. "Hello, you slimy, murdering bastards. Guess what? Game over," he said with a sneer. "You are officially out of business."

Oh, how he wanted to tear them limb from limb! To sink his teeth into their hides, stretch *their* skins out for tanning, and make necklaces out of *their* fucking teeth!

He'd promised Matthew he wouldn't, though, that he'd leave them to the police, and he would keep his word.

Then again, he *hadn't* promised he wouldn't put the fear of God into them first.

Smiling a death's head grin, he quickly stripped off his clothes before the poachers realized what was happening, and shifted.

The police came, took their statements, and dragged the handcuffed poachers away. Of course, no one believed the story about being attacked by a panther, particularly when they insisted Ty was the animal in question. With Ty's testimony, and the evidence collected from the scene, the men would be going away for a very long time.

By unspoken agreement, Ty remained with Matthew. Ty had the feeling he'd be hanging around for quite a while. Maybe he'd even go back to school. Matthew could use a competent assistant, somebody who really had compassion for the animals he treated. Who better to help animals in distress than somebody who actually walked in their fur?

"You were really taking a chance back there, you know," Matthew chided. They were sitting in his living room, pigging out on some of the best barbeque east of Texas. A circle of dogs surrounded them, all watching them intently. A few cats lounged on the furniture, too haughty to beg. "You promised to let the police handle it."

Ty feigned a look of innocence. "I *did* let them handle it."

Matthew snorted. "No, you didn't, and you enjoyed every minute of it, too. Admit it...you have a thing for making grown men mess their shorts, don't you?"

"Well, maybe just a little. They deserved all they got and more," Ty replied.

"Just don't do it again, or you'll find yourself out of my bed and back in the cage, buddy."

Ty ducked his head and shivered in mock terror.

"What's wrong? Cat got your tongue?"

Ty groaned. "Oh, no. Not the bad cat jokes..."

"Oh, don't be such a pussy."

"Stop, please!" Ty said, giving in to the urge to laugh. As Matthew's warm laughter joined his, Ty realized he was another lucky stray who'd finally found a home.