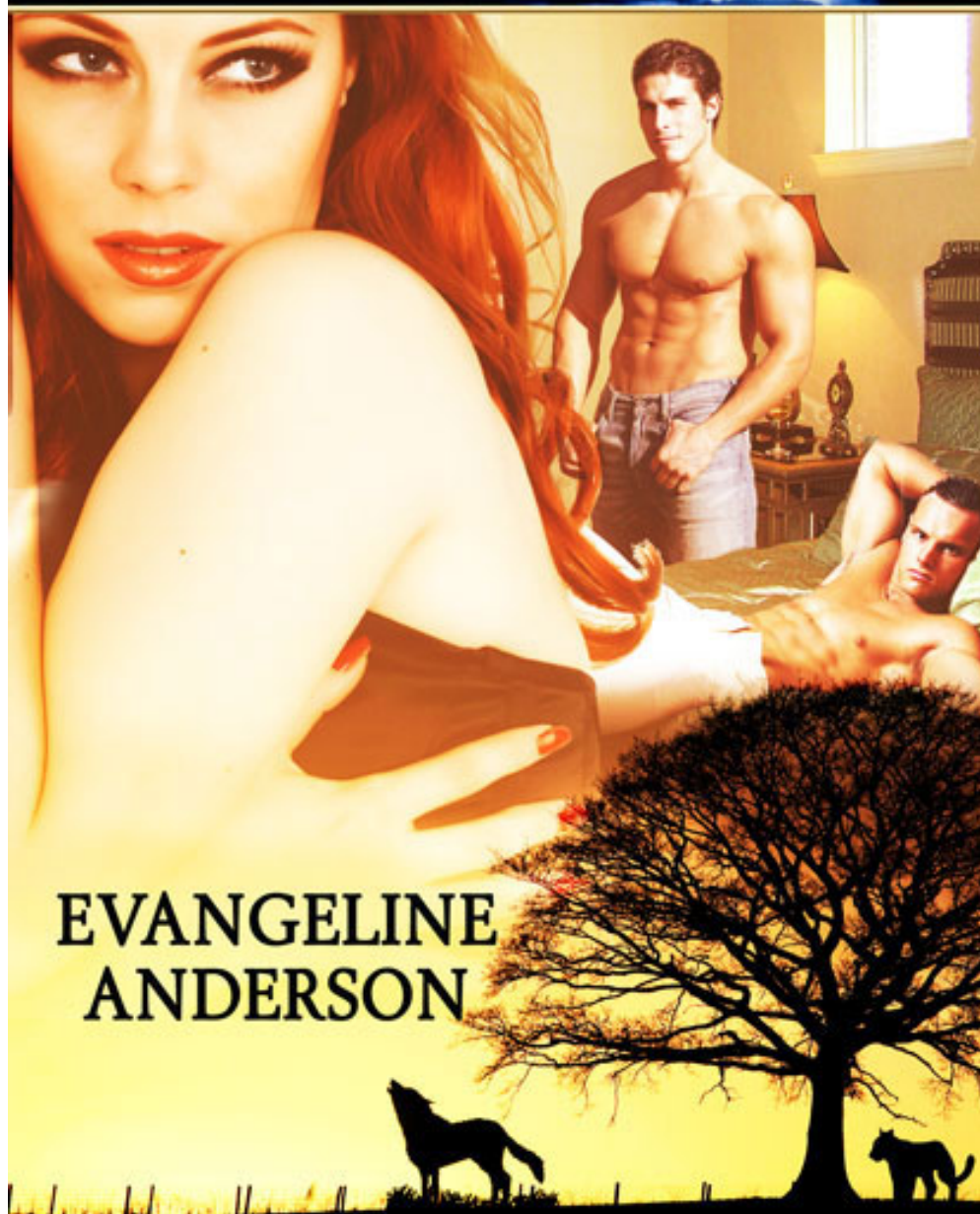


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



EVANGELINE  
ANDERSON

*Madeline's*  
**MATES**

## **Madeline's Mates**

*Evangeline Anderson*

Madeline Grant leads a lonely existence. Growing up an orphan, she's never felt she belonged anywhere or to anyone. But all that is about to change.

One snowy night, a huge man with piercing blue eyes comes into the ER where Maddy works. He takes one look at her and tells her she's about to go into heat. Maddy thinks he's crazy—until his strange predictions begin to come true. But inviting the man, Jake, into her life, throws her world into a whirlwind of confusion. As if the news that she's a shapeshifter isn't enough, she also has to breed with her own kind—which means that no matter how much she desires Jake, he's forbidden to have her.

Enter Jake's best friend, Will—a shifter of the same breed as Maddy. He wants her at once but her heart is already taken. Thrown into the dark and dangerous world of shifter taboos, Maddy must decide whether to follow her head or her heart as she tries to survive the Christmas heat.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Madeline's Mates

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# ***MADLINE'S MATES***

**Evangeline Anderson**

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## Chapter One

"Turn over. On your hands and knees – now!" The deep masculine growl in her ear is forceful, demanding. But Maddy isn't scared – rather the command fires her blood, filling her with a wanting that matches her captor's own.

"Make me," she returns, challenging him though he has her pinned to the bed, looming over her in a position of unmistakable dominance.

He growls again and leans down to nip the side of her neck almost playfully. Her senses are suddenly filled with him. Can lust have a scent? If so, he's drenched in it. Her body reacts, flaring with sudden lust of her own. Had she thought she was on fire before? Now she is burning out of control. Her nipples are suddenly tight and the cleft between her thighs is swollen with not just wanting but need – she *needs* him inside her, filling her, taking her as she has never been taken before.

Her fever must be catching. His hands on her hips as he turns her are rough, impatient with need. Maddy lets herself be turned willingly, not fighting the fire that is growing, threatening to consume them both. He flips her to her hands and knees and she arches under him, the naked curve of her ass brushing something hard and hot – his cock. Her pussy is drenched, juices slick against her inner thighs. She needs him in her, thrusting deep, opening her with his thick length, owning her completely.

But now he's in the mood to tease. She feels the blunt probe that must be the head of his cock slide over her inner folds, gliding over the throbbing bud of her clit but never quite finding her entrance. God, he's driving her crazy!

"Do it!" She is the one demanding now but he only laughs, a deep chuckle that seems to vibrate her from the inside out.

"Beg for it," he taunts her. "Tell me how much you want it – how you need my cock in your hot little cunt."

"Please!" She halfway knows that this is what he wanted all along but she is far past dignity. Past shame or embarrassment. Her whole body is on fire from the tips of her toes to the crown of her head and everywhere in between. Her skin is hypersensitive. She can feel the fringe of her long, flame red hair brushing the small of her back, his hot breath against the side of her neck, the heat of his big body branding her naked skin as he prepares to enter her...

"You ready?" he breathes in her ear, his deep voice full of promise. "Ready for me, sweetheart?"

"Yes!" she moans, pressing back against him. Her hunger for him is nearly overwhelming – the fire is threatening to consume her if he doesn't take her soon.

But he doesn't take her at her word. She feels him shift behind her and then big, hard hands are spreading her thighs even wider. Before she can ask what he's doing, hot breath bathes her swollen slit and then an even hotter tongue slides slowly, teasingly, between her pussy lips. He laps her cunt softly at first and then harder, thrusting his tongue into her as though trying to get every last bit of her cunt honey.

Maddy feels like she's going to scream. It's too much and not enough all at the same time. His tongue is good but it isn't hard enough, isn't long enough. She needs him inside her, needs to be completely filled with his cock. Needs to be held down, dominated, *fucked*.

At last he pulls back. "You're ready," he affirms, as though he had to be certain for himself before continuing.

She's almost sobbing with need. Of course she's ready! Can't he see it—see the way her pussy is opening for him? Can't he see the way her cunt is so hot and wet her juices are wetting her thighs? Can't he taste and smell her need to have him in her? Why won't he give her what she needs?

As though in answer to her silent prayers she feels him against her again. Not his tongue this time but his cock. Hard and hot and heavy, it sways against her leg, brushing her inner thighs before finally finding her slick entrance. And despite her burning need and overwhelming desire, Maddy feels a quick rush of fear. Somehow she knows that he's big—huge, in fact. Longer and harder and thicker than she's ever had before. Yet still she wants him, her hunger burning through the sudden terror and consuming her once more.

"Please!" she begs again, shamelessly.

And then he is on her—in her. One deep thrust is all it takes and she is completely filled with him. Though she is wetter than she has ever been in her life she can't contain a low moan as her inner walls stretch to take him. He's so big, so thick, pinning her to the bed with his cock, holding her down as he prepares to thrust.

But he doesn't move just yet. He is whispering in her ear, telling her what a good girl she is, how brave and beautiful and perfect to take his long, thick cock so deep in her cunt. Maddy warms to the words of praise, preening under him, arching her back and tilting her pelvis up toward him, as though trying to pull him even deeper into her tight channel.

Hard, warm hands stroke her naked back, soothing her like a nervous horse he's getting ready to ride. And indeed, she can feel him quivering within her, almost ready to thrust, almost ready to fuck her so hard she'll never forget it.

Maddy is ready for it, more than ready to feel him thrusting, fucking into her with long, slow, hard, deliberate strokes as he takes her where she so desperately needs to go. As he gives her what she's been searching for so long...

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Madeline Grant—Maddy to her friends—woke up suddenly. Sweat bloomed along her spine and her head was throbbing as it always did after The Dream. She thought about it like that, in capital letters, because it was always the same. The same animalistic need, the passionate fury, the aching to be not just taken but *fucked* within an inch of her life. God, she could practically still smell him—the man in her dream. The masculine scent of his lust seemed to permeate her sheets and she could almost feel him inside her...

Feeling the need for some reality, she threw back the plain white sheets and looked between her legs, half expecting to see that she was as wet and hot in real life as she had been in The Dream.

But no. As always her well-trimmed thatch of reddish-gold curls sat primly above the slit of her sex. She wasn't swollen or leaking juice as she had been in The Dream. In fact, when she touched herself she found that she was as dry and tight as always. What was the word Kevin had always used? Oh yes, "uninviting". Just another way to say frigid, which is what he'd graduated to right before their breakup a month ago.

Maddy stared at her sex in confusion. How could she have such a lascivious dream and have absolutely no outward effects from it? And why now? Why not before when she and Kevin were living together and she was trying every way she could to turn on for him? Not that anything had worked...

She sighed. *Stop thinking about it. It's over now. He's gone and he's not coming back.* Strangely the thought wasn't one of regret but relief. It had never felt right with Kevin. Even though he was a respected orthopedic surgeon and very handsome—despite being a little short—Maddy had never really felt that they belonged together. It was never real—like they were kids playing house and might get called in for dinner at any time, ending the game forever. So when Kevin had finally called it quits she'd let him go without a fight. "You're right, it's just not working between us," she'd told him when he asked for his ring, a four-carat diamond all her friends had oohed and aahed over, back.

Unspoken, at least by her, was the fact that *she* was the reason their relationship had gone down the drain. It was her inability to warm to him, her dislike of sex that was to blame for the wasted years they'd spent together.

It wasn't that she'd had a traumatic event in her past. Growing up in the foster-care system, she might have endured all kinds of mistreatment. But thanks to a kindly family that had taken her in for most of her childhood, she'd avoided sexual and emotional abuse. And she hadn't been attacked or date raped during her college years either. In fact, there was no good reason why Maddy didn't care for sex—she just didn't.

*It's my body's fault,* she thought as she dragged herself out of bed and went for the shower in the plain little apartment she was renting until she could find another place. Her body advertised fantasies she couldn't fulfill. At five-nine she had a lush, curvy form with full hips and heavy breasts tipped with pale pink nipples. Chocolate brown eyes as wide and innocent as a doe's dominated her heart-shaped face framed with



long, flame red hair that fell in thick waves down to the small of her back. When men looked at her all they saw was sex. And when she couldn't deliver...

"They move on," Maddy muttered to herself as she twisted the shower nozzle, aiming the heated spray of water for her face. She tried to wash the cobwebs of The Dream away but somehow it wouldn't go. She could still almost feel her dream lover's big rough hands all over her body, caressing, squeezing, cupping her full breasts, sliding down between her thighs...

"God, what's wrong with me?" She pushed the images away. Whoever she'd been dreaming about, it certainly wasn't her ex-fiancé. Kevin's hands had been soft as a girl's—he babied them every night with special collagen hand cream that smelled unappealingly of overripe lemons. "My hands are my livelihood," he always said, flexing his long, skinny fingers until the knuckles popped. "Can't operate if I don't take care of the hands."

Maddy had gotten sick of hearing about his hands—almost as sick as she'd gotten of having them on her. She knew it was her imagination but it seemed like the lemon-scented cream he used left a trail of slime everywhere he touched her, making it impossible for her to want to make love with him.

Kevin hadn't just relied on his valuable hands, however. He'd tried every way he could to excite her. But toys, vibrators, exotic lovemaking techniques and plenty of what Kevin jokingly called "cunning-linguis" all left Maddy cold. Cold and dry and tight—uninviting.

Frigid.

So why was she having these incredibly sexy dreams lately? It seemed like every time she put her head on the pillow her dream lover was there, waiting for her. His hands were large and hard and knowing, heating her with their touch the way Kevin's never had. And he was big—looming over her, making her feel positively petite. Her ex-fiance had been about a half inch shorter than her with a slender build. But this man was huge and muscular, his big body hard and hot and demanding. Masculine in every way. And just by being near her, he made her want him. When she closed her eyes she could almost still catch that elusive spice that seemed to permeate her dreams, calling her to him...

"Snap out of it, Maddy," she told herself sharply. "It's just a dream and you know the reality." Yes, the reality was that she couldn't get hot. Not for Kevin, not for anyone. She'd never tried so hard to get aroused as she had when she was with her ex but she had been with men before Kevin and every time it was the same. First, her body's refusal to get excited, no matter how skillful her lover. Then the embarrassing need to use some kind of lubricant in her tight, dry channel, and the unsatisfying and often painful thrusting. The experience always finished up with an orgasm but it was never hers. Another shameful secret that Maddy had never dared share with anyone was that she'd never been able to come, even on her own. It made her wonder why everyone thought sex was so great. But then, maybe it *was* great with normal people—which she clearly wasn't.

Trying to drive the useless loop of guilt and blame from her mind, she twisted the dial to cold for a moment and endured an icy blast of water that left her gasping. Then, The Dream finally eradicated, she shut off the water and reached for a towel. Shivering, she twisted the water from her hair and dried the roots with rough strokes before wrapping the damp terrycloth around herself and climbing out of the shower stall.

No matter that her love life was in shambles, she still had to go to work. And this being the week before Christmas, the ER would be hopping since a lot of local doctors' offices had already closed for the holiday. Being a triage nurse in the only hospital available for fifty miles in the foothills of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains was okay – *most* of the time. Mountain residents tended to be hardy and resilient, reluctant to come to the ER for anything less than a life-threatening illness or trauma. But there were always spikes around the holidays and since Maddy didn't have any family to spend Thanksgiving and Christmas with, she usually wound up working at least one of them.

This year she had already worked Thanksgiving and after tonight she had Christmas and the week leading up to it off. Not that she had anyone to spend the holiday with. She'd planned it that way six months ago, back when she and Kevin were still together. Now it just seemed pointless.

Sighing, she looked through her closet and picked out a pair of plain navy blue scrubs with no design on them. She supposed since this was the season she ought to wear a pair of her Christmas scrubs but somehow she didn't feel festive right now. The red scrubs with the pattern of holly wreathes weren't right. And the green scrubs with the upside down Santa stuck in the chimney with his boots sticking out and a muffled "ho-ho-help!" coming out in a little cartoon bubble just didn't fit her mood. In fact, the way she was feeling right now, she wished she had some scrubs that were the color of the sky outside – iron gray and gloomy.

Suddenly she was disgusted by her own weakness. "Get over it, Maddy," she muttered savagely, pulling on the navy blue scrubs. "Life goes on." Yes, it did, one gray day after another and they were all the same. And nothing was going to change because she would never find someone who wanted her the way she was instead of for what her body seemed to promise.

Twisting her still-damp hair into a knot at the back of her neck, she shoved in a few bobby pins to hold it in place. Staring at the mirror, she started to reach for her compact and then let her hand drop. She hadn't been wearing much makeup lately – not that she'd ever been the type to pull a Tammy Faye Bakker. But trying to play up her looks, even a little, just seemed like false advertisement now. The baggy scrubs hid her unresponsive body, and with her thick red hair scraped back and her face naked of makeup, no one could accuse her of flirting or leading them on. *What you see is what you get – plain Jane*, Maddy thought with grim satisfaction as she glanced once more in the mirror.

Stopping in the tiny, utilitarian kitchen, she grabbed a cold Pop-Tart to eat. She wasn't really hungry, but she was about to work a twelve-hour shift and she knew from experience that without some fuel she'd be half dead before she was even halfway

through. The tasteless pastry crumbled in her mouth and the gooey, too-sweet strawberry filling coated her tongue as she grabbed her coat and keys and stepped out into the gray November day. She forced herself to eat it anyway, knowing that if she waited for her appetite to catch up she'd be waiting forever.

Lately she was never hungry and always tired. She'd probably lost ten pounds in the last month or two without even trying—she just never wanted to eat. Adding to her fatigue and loss of appetite were the wickedly bad cramps she'd been having for the last week—and it wasn't even time for her period yet. Maddy knew she should get it checked out but somehow it seemed like too much effort to ask one of the docs to write her a script for a pelvic ultrasound. Probably she just had an ovarian cyst that would burst on its own when it was good and ready. As a nurse, she knew this was fairly common and nothing to really be alarmed about. In the meantime, all she wanted was to crawl back into bed and sleep and sleep and sleep. But even that was ruined by the damn dream that wouldn't leave her alone. God, she was a mess!

Outside the sky was just as iron gray as it had looked from her bedroom window and the trees were almost bare of leaves. The mountains were a beautiful place to live but in the winter their beauty turned stark and austere. The bones of the Blue Ridge seemed to push up under the sparse brown grass, reminding her that no matter how gorgeous the landscape was the rest of the year, she was really just living on a jagged shelf of rock as bare and cold as her heart.

Maddy climbed into her small but powerful truck—a V8-engine was a necessity when it came to getting altitude on mountain highways—and turned the key. The engine caught with a coughing roar, making her glad she'd gotten it tuned up recently. Winter in the mountains could be brutal and you didn't want to be stranded without your ride. The air outside already smelled like snow and who knew what it would be like when she finished her shift at nine tonight? Next time she went to the garage she'd have to get Pete to put chains on her tires. In the meantime she turned on the heater and hoped the snow would hold off a little while longer.

She had a feeling it was going to be a long, cold winter.

## Chapter Two

"All our beds are full at the moment but you'll be called back as soon as something clears out." Maddy tried to use her most professional and patient tone but after eleven hours of her twelve-hour shift she was almost out of both professionalism and patience. If only Peggy, the senior nurse supervisor who was working with her tonight, would come back from her never-ending break. Maddy had known it would be a rough shift but this was ridiculous!

Three gunshot wounds and a stabbing victim had been brought in just in the past hour, as well as a guy whose fiancée had bitten his tongue off in a fit of jealous rage when his ex-girlfriend had stopped by for a glass of pre-Christmas cheer. Maddy supposed it could have been worse—the fiancée could have gone looking for something lower to chew on. But somehow she doubted that the guy who was currently gargling with his own blood in trauma two felt especially lucky right now.

The entire day had been like this with home injuries—like the guy who tried to carve himself a piece of frozen turkey with his chainsaw and wound up minus a finger—to violent crimes like the gunshots, stabbing and tongue chewing. Apparently people could only take so much family togetherness before they went insane.

*And to think I was feeling lonely and wishing for a family of my own.* Maddy shook her head at her own stupidity. Growing up an orphan, she'd often felt like she didn't belong anywhere but maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. After all, she'd rather be lonely than spend the holiday season with someone she loathed so much she felt the need to take a shotgun to them. *Almost done*, she reminded herself. *And after this I get a whole week off.* Holding on to that thought like a lifeline, she dived into the stack of intake forms once more and prepared to call the next patient.

"Need some help here." The rough, masculine voice broke through her blurry concentration as she tried to scan the next set of paperwork.

Maddy looked up...and up and up. Standing in front of the scuffed, mint green triage desk was hands down the biggest man she'd ever seen. Snowflakes were melting in his wild, tousled black hair and piercing blue eyes like a Husky's glared at her from a square-jawed face that was dark with stubble. Despite the cold weather outside he was wearing only faded jeans and a black wifebeater shirt that showed a muscular chest and arms. Arms that were covered in old, silvery-white scars. But the state of his arms wasn't what drew her immediate attention—it was what he held in them.

He was holding another man—cradling him like a baby—and with no apparent strain though the patient was almost as big as he was. A glance at the unconscious man's face showed that he was young—maybe no more than an overgrown teenager—

but his age wasn't what concerned Maddy. What worried her about the unconscious boy the man was holding was the amount of blood covering him.

"My God, what happened?" She was out from behind the desk before she knew what she was doing, anxiously looking over the boy. The blood appeared to be coming from multiple savage bite wounds that covered his arms, chest and legs. Whatever had been at him had torn his jeans and shirt to shreds and she could see pale, bloody skin between the jagged rips in the sodden fabric.

"Attacked by wolves," the man holding the patient said shortly. "Can you help him?"

Maddy didn't bother answering him. She was already on the phone barking, "I need a doctor out here STAT. Yes, I know you're busy but this is a bad one. Hurry!" Dropping the phone back behind the desk, she ran for the spare stretcher she kept in reserve and wheeled it out. But when she maneuvered it out to the waiting area, the man seemed reluctant to release his burden.

"S all right," he said when Maddy tried to get him to put the boy down. "I can hold onto him till the doc gets here." Legs braced and muscles bunched as he held his burden, he looked prepared to stand there all day.

"We need to examine him." Maddy patted the starched white sheet that covered the padded stretcher coaxingly. "I can tell he's important to you but we need to get a look at him if we're going to help him."

Reluctantly, the big man lowered the patient to the stretcher, being careful not to jostle him too much in the process. He stroked dark blond hair off the boy's bloody forehead with a tenderness belied by his big hands and a look of sorrow so deep it was nearly agony twisted his strong features.

"Will he be okay?" He looked at Maddy for reassurance and despite the long wearying hours she'd been on the job she found herself wanting to give it. But she knew from experience that giving false hope was crueler than the truth.

"I don't know," she said in a low voice. "But we'll do our best for him—you did the right thing bringing him in. And here comes the doctor now."

"What is it? What's so important that you couldn't just—" Dr. Simons, the ER attending that night, broke off as he saw the boy lying on the stretcher. "Vitals?" he snapped at Maddy.

She shook her head. "He just came in a minute ago. I wanted you to see him before I sent him back so you could decide to call the chopper or not." Patients beyond their ability to help had to be airlifted to UVA but that was a call for the doctor, not a triage nurse.

"He's still alive, anyway." Simons took the patient's pulse, frowning. "But it looks like he's lost a lot of blood. Might need a transfusion. How much O neg do we have on hand?"

"I'll have to call and find out—" Maddy started but just then Peggy, the senior nurse working with her, appeared at her elbow.

"I'll get this," she said, squeezing Maddy's arm reassuringly. "Sorry I didn't get back from break sooner. If I'd known this was going on..." She let the sentence trail off, shaking her head. "You handle the paperwork end of it," she said, putting a clipboard into Maddy's hands and nodding at the man who'd brought the patient in. "I have a feeling tall, dark and scary over there is getting ready to bolt so try to get what you can."

"Got it." Maddy nodded and looked up to see that Peggy was right. The tall man with pale blue eyes was fading toward the sliding glass doors, obviously looking for a way out. "Hey, wait," she called to him. "We have to get some information before you go."

Without answering he slipped through the doors and out into the night. Cursing to herself, Maddy grabbed a pen from the cup holder on the triage desk and ran out after him. The wind slapped her face like an icy hand, pelting her with a few stray snowflakes, but she squared her shoulders and kept after him anyway.

"Wait a minute," she called at his broad, retreating back.

"Got nothin' to tell you, lady." He kept walking, throwing the words back over his shoulder.

Maddy felt a surge of anger. It had been a long night and the boy's life was at stake. All she needed was a little information and this jerk wouldn't even turn around and look at her.

"Hey!" Putting on a burst of speed, she raced forward, her tennis shoes crunching over the frozen sidewalk, and jumped in front of him. He tried to sidestep around her but she matched him, bobbing to stay face-to-face. Or face-to-chest, anyway, since he was so tall. "Hey, I'm talking to you." She put the hand not holding the clipboard on her hip and glared up at him.

"What do you want? I'm in a hurry." His deep voice was a menacing growl but Maddy refused to be intimidated.

"What do I want? How about a few facts about your friend? Just a few little things like blood type, allergies, medical history – not to mention his name."

He crossed his arms over his chest, biceps bulging with the motion. In the light of the nearly full moon the scars on his arms were silvery. It occurred to Maddy that they looked like bites – old bites that had healed badly.

"Sorry, can't help you – I don't know the guy from Adam."

"You expect me to believe that?" Maddy demanded. "Look, I saw the way you looked at him – you were really upset. You *have* to know him."

A look of guilt passed over his strong features and was gone almost before she could register it. "Nope. Never saw him before I found him outside my cabin an hour ago."

Maddy couldn't believe it – couldn't believe he had the nerve to stand there and tell her such a bald-faced lie. She poked a finger in his face. "I don't believe you." She

normally wouldn't have been so rude, but it had been a long day and she was at the very end of her patience.

His piercing blue eyes narrowed. "You calling me a liar, darlin'? 'Cause I have to tell you, I really don't appreciate that."

"I don't care what you appreciate Mr...whoever you are. I just—" Maddy started and then stopped herself. This was getting out of hand. She took a deep breath and put a calming hand on his bare, muscular arm. "Look, I promise it won't take long. If you'll just answer a few—"

The man made as if to shrug her off and then froze.

Maddy froze too. There was something...something like a current of warmth running up her fingers and into her hand and arm. And it seemed to be coming from him. Or else flowing between her fingers and his arm somehow. A gust of icy wind swirled around them and she couldn't help noticing his warm, masculine smell. *Craziest thing but damn, he smells incredible. What kind of aftershave is he wearing anyway?* As she watched, the man's nostrils flared and he inhaled deeply, as though catching her scent on the icy wind as well. *Does he like what he smells? Do I smell as good to him as he does to me?*

"I-I'm sorry." She shook her head to clear the crazy thoughts and started to take back her hand.

"Jake." The man caught her hand in both of his, his grip urgent. "Jake Redthorn."

"I'm sorry?" This time it was a question. She looked up at him, feeling dazed. The warm current had intensified somehow until it was like a gentle fire licking up along her arm and across the front of her breasts. What was he doing to her?

"You wanted to know my name. You called me 'Mr. whoever you are'."

"I... Did I?" Maddy shook her head. "I'm sorry, I was just so angry."

He nodded as though her anger made perfect sense to him. "Of course you are this close to your heat. Why are you even working on a night like tonight anyway, Miss...?" He raised his eyebrows in a silent question and after a minute Maddy realized he wanted her name. She wasn't sure what he was talking about and the warm fire climbing up her arm and across her entire body was making it hard to think. But the part of her brain that dealt with social niceties was on automatic from years of dealing with patients.

"Grant. Madeline Grant but everyone calls me Maddy," she said.

"And you're working tonight because...?"

Maddy frowned. Wasn't she supposed to be the one asking the questions? "Because this is my shift. I have the next week and Christmas off but it doesn't matter since I don't have any family to spend it with," she said and then felt immediately embarrassed. Why had she said all that? There was no way this tall stranger needed to know the sad details of her personal life.

He shook his head, slightly impatient. "No, I don't mean why are you working the week before Christmas. I mean why are you working so close to the end of your cycle? I almost never see another shifter out around the humans, and to be this close to them when you're so near your breeding time is damn dangerous. I just wondered why you'd risk it."

"Risk what?" Maddy wondered if they were even speaking the same language. What was he talking about? Cycles and breeding time and humans—as if he wasn't one! It occurred to her that she would be able to think better if she wasn't touching him but somehow she couldn't bring herself to take back her hand.

"Risk losing control," he said as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. "You could hurt one of them if you're not careful and you know that's one helluva taboo to break."

"Taboo?" Maddy repeated stupidly but he only nodded.

"Yeah. What tribe are you anyway? I can tell you're not wolf." He leaned close to her and inhaled deeply, his eyes closing briefly in silent appreciation. "I got it—Lynx, right? And damn, are you close. You *really* shouldn't be out tonight."

"Look, Mr. Redthorn—"

"Jake," he interrupted her, his smile like a white slash in his dark face. Whatever it was he thought he knew about her had turned him from surly to friendly in a hot minute. "Call me Jake, darlin'."

"Jake, then. I don't have any idea what you're talking about but we...I...I need to ask you these questions." Maddy waved the clipboard she was still clutching in the hand he wasn't holding, trying to make her brain work properly around the warm current of electricity that was flowing between them. Inside her plain, white lace bra her nipples were tight little points and the seam of her scrub pants was pressing in an irritatingly pleasurable way between her legs. From somewhere deep in her brain a little voice whispered that she was getting turned on, getting aroused. *But that's impossible*, she argued with the voice. *I never get turned on no matter what...*

Her confused inner thoughts were interrupted by his deep voice.

"You're telling me you don't know what I'm talking about? That you're out here surrounded by humans, about to go into heat with no idea of the danger you're in or the threat you pose to the people around you?"

For the first time Maddy began to be scared. "I-I don't understand you. I think you'd better let me go." She tugged on her hand but he wouldn't release her.

His look was anxious now. "Tell me you're kidding, darlin'," he said earnestly. "It's just the two of us so you can admit what you are. I may be a different tribe than you, but we're both shifters under the skin."

"I don't know what you're talking about and I'm not like you." *I'm not crazy*. The words trembled on her lips but she swallowed them back. Somehow they had moved away from the ER, so far that the sliding-glass doors were barely a small lighted rectangle over her shoulder. The icy night was utterly still except for the sudden gusts



of wind that swirled snowflakes around them both and rustled the bare branches of the naked trees. She had followed this huge, dangerous man out into the snow and darkness and now she was trapped. Trapped...

Her fear seemed to transmit itself somehow because he jumped suddenly and dropped her hand as though she'd shocked him. Maddy was relieved when the warm, intimate fire that had flowed between them suddenly ended.

"I'm sorry, didn't mean to scare you," he rumbled. "But you have to know —"

"I don't have to know anything. Goodbye." Maddy whirled around, skidding on the icy walk, and almost ran for the beacon of the lighted ER doors.

"Wait!" His deep voice held a command that was somehow difficult to refuse.

Maddy slowed her gait but didn't stop. "Talk fast. I'm leaving," she said, keeping her face toward the rapidly growing rectangle of light.

"You're tired all the time. Tired and irritable and you have to force yourself to eat because you're never hungry."

His voice was closer than she liked but Maddy couldn't help slowing her step even more. "Go on..."

"You're having pains—cramps—even though it's not your time of the month," he continued. "And you're having thoughts...visions you can't explain and can't get rid of."

"Dreams." Against her will Maddy stopped and turned to face him. *I'm close enough now to scream if he grabs me.* But she was less scared of what he might do and more scared of what he might say. "Dreams," she repeated, looking into his pale blue eyes. "I have...dreams. Just one dream, actually. It's always the same but sometimes the details change..." She broke off, blushing when she thought of the details of her X-rated dream.

"You don't have to tell me what kind. I can tell by your voice, darlin'." His own voice was soft, intimate. "Look, I don't know how you got this far without knowing who and what you are but let me tell you, those are all signs of a female about to go into heat. And it doesn't matter what tribe you are, that's a dangerous thing if you don't have a male of your own kind around to service you."

"Service me?" Maddy felt a fresh rush of warm blood to her cold cheeks. Was he really saying what she thought he was saying?

"The point is you're a danger to yourself and others. And if you don't get taken care of you could be risking your life." He was serious now—his pale Husky eyes pinning her to the spot. "I know this is hard to understand if you weren't raised in a tribe and you don't know what you are but please, believe me."

"I-I don't know what I believe." Maddy sighed and squeezed the clipboard to her chest. Suddenly she was so tired she felt like she could lie down on the frozen sidewalk and sleep for a thousand years. "Why do you care, anyway?"

"You cared about how I felt when I came in. Can't I return the favor?" He reached out, his long fingers brushing her cheek in a gentle caress that sent fire through her body and started her heart pounding once more.

Maddy stepped away. "Um, thanks for your concern but I have to get back to work. My shift is almost over and they'll be wondering where I am." Then she mentally kicked herself—rule number one in dealing with strange men was don't let them know when you'll be alone and vulnerable. And although she no longer had the feeling that Jake Redthorn wanted to hurt her, he was still plenty strange.

He frowned. "You still don't believe me. Great." He sighed and ran his hand through his wild black hair. "Okay, give me the clipboard."

Maddy handed it over and watched as he flipped over one of the forms and started scribbling on the back with the pen she'd somehow managed to hold on to. "What's this?" she asked as he handed it back.

He looked grim. "The phone number where I'm staying. I shouldn't be doing this but things are only going to get worse for you in the next day or two. Call me when you can't stand it anymore. I can get you to people who can help you get through this."

"Get through *what*?" she asked as he turned to leave.

He looked back over his shoulder, his pale eyes piercing and serious. "Your first heat, Maddy. If you don't have help when you go through it, you might not survive it."

And then something really strange happened. As she watched, his light blue eyes flashed a deep, unmistakable gold. *Wolf's eyes*, Maddy thought, and though she didn't know where the idea came from, it seemed right.

"Call me when you're ready to believe." His deep voice was rough—wild in a way it hadn't been before. And something in it seemed to call to her, call to something in her blood that was waking up for the first time and stretching like a cat after a long, lazy nap.

Then he turned and headed back into the swirling wind, disappearing from sight faster than she would have believed possible. Maddy stood shivering, looking into the darkness where he had vanished and clutching the clipboard to her chest. *Did I really just see that? Did his eyes really change from blue to gold?* A feeling of deep unease was blooming inside her, a heavy foreboding that felt like a black cloud of doom hanging over her head.

*Things are only going to get worse.*

Was he for real? How had he done that to his eyes? And how in the world had he known about all her strange symptoms? He'd claimed they were alike in some way but how? Only half aware of what she was doing, she pulled the piece of paper he'd written on off the clipboard, folded it in half and pushed it into her deepest scrub pocket. Then she turned back toward the ER.

No matter what strange prophecies of doom had just been forecast, she couldn't go until shift change. It was time to get back to real life.

## Chapter Three

"Are you gonna fight me or will you be a good girl tonight?"

"No—I won't fight." Maddy arches up to him, offering her naked breasts with their dark, rosy nipples. She needs him too much to play games. Even now she can feel the pain rippling through her, the hunger that starts deep inside and moves outward, toward her pussy. It's like a cramp but deeper and only one thing can soothe it—the thing that only he can give her.

"Such a good girl." His voice is a deep approving growl as he runs one big hand between her breasts and down the rounded plane of her abdomen. He finishes by cupping her hot sex in his broad palm.

Maddy moans and arches up to him again as two long, strong fingers slip deep into her cunt. God it feels good to have him in her—feels right, as nothing has ever felt right before. They fit together like two pieces of a puzzle and every touch of his big hands on her body is pure pleasure.

"You like that, don't you, sweetheart?" he growls softly, still pumping inside her hungry sex. "God, you're so wet and ready for me. Are you going to spread your legs and take my cock deep in that sweet little cunt tonight?"

"Yes..." Maddy breathes. She feels no shame or reluctance, only an animalistic need to submit to him, to be filled and dominated and taken. "Please..." she whispers, begging softly. "Please, I need it so much. Need *you* so much."

He chuckles softly. "I know, sweetheart. I need you too. Can't wait to come inside you." He withdraws his fingers and licks them clean, clearly savoring her flavor. Then he lowers himself on top of her, his weight a welcome burden as he settles himself between her legs.

Maddy moans as he finds her slick entrance and begins to press inside her, filling her slowly, inch by inch with his thickness. Opening her, owning her even as he groans her name like a curse or a prayer...

\* \* \* \* \*

Maddy woke in a cold sweat, sure that this time she had started her period even though it was weeks early. The cramps were excruciating and between her thighs she was sticky and warm and wet.

"Great—probably ruined the sheets," she muttered. "Like I have so many to spare." And then another cramp doubled her over, making her gasp with pain. Really, this was getting to be too much. Was there something wrong with her besides an early onset of her period or an ovarian cyst? The only other thing she could think of was an ectopic

pregnancy but there was no way that was possible. She'd had her period since she and Kevin broke up and anyway, they had always used protection at her insistence.

The pale gray glow from outside didn't do much to light the room so when the cramp passed she sat up and reached for the reading lamp beside the bed. Snapping it on, she flipped back the plain white sheets, expecting to see a bloody mess.

But not a single drop of crimson marred the plain white cotton sheets. Instead, when she parted her legs, fearful of what she might see, the shine of clear fluid met her eyes. Maddy stared at it in wonder for a moment before realizing what it must be.

*Wet. I'm actually...wet.* She'd heard other women whisper about this, had heard all the crude sayings in high school and college—*creamed your jeans, got damp in the panties*—but it had never happened to her before. As if to emphasize the true meaning of her slick thighs, her pussy lips were swollen and sensitive. What was going on with her?

Just then another cramp hit her—this one so sharp it left her breathless. God, maybe she should go to the ER—as a patient this time instead of a nurse. But though the feeling was completely irrational, she somehow knew there wasn't anything they could do for her there.

*Things are going to get a lot worse,* she heard a deep, masculine voice whispering inside her head. *Call me when you're ready to believe...* And then his eyes had flashed gold. Wolf's eyes. And he'd said they were alike—said he could help her.

Before she knew what she was doing Maddy was out of bed and rummaging around in the pocket of her discarded scrubs. She found his number and was just reaching for her cell phone when she saw what time it was. Six o'clock. But not in the morning—it was six at night.

*What the hell happened? Have I really been asleep that long?* She'd been exhausted after her long shift and all the craziness there at the end. When she'd come home she'd stripped off her clothes and fallen into bed, intending to get up the next day and do some chores and housecleaning—not that there was much to clean in her bare little apartment. She hadn't bothered setting the alarm because she didn't have to go to work and she figured she'd slept in. *Well I certainly did that—slept in for about eighteen hours. God, can't believe I did that!*

Another cramp hit, this one even more painful than the last. And with it came the overwhelming urge to call him—to call Jake Redthorn, the man with the golden wolf's eyes. The rational part of her brain knew she ought to be calling her doctor instead. Or better yet, going in to the ER where she knew everyone and could get whatever diagnostic tests she needed without the needless delay of going through her primary physician. But the other part of her, the part she'd felt waking up and stretching the night before, demanded that she call Jake instead.

"Hello?" A warm female voice answered on the second ring and Maddy nearly hung up as an irrational wave of jealousy surged through her. She had to remind

herself that Jake hadn't given her his number for a date. *He only said he could help you, not that he wasn't attached.*

"Hello?" she made herself say. "Is...is Jake there?"

"You must be the nurse from last night. He said you might be calling—he was real worried about you." The voice was friendly but slightly hoarse, as though whoever was speaking was just getting over a cold.

"Um, thanks. Is he available?" Maddy wasn't sure what to say to this woman who she didn't even know but who obviously knew all the details of her encounter with the mysterious Jake the night before. Had he told her about the tingling fire that had passed between them when they touched? Or had that all been a figment of Maddy's own imagination?

"He's right here, honey," the homey female voice assured her. "Oh, and I'm his older sister in case you're wondering. I know how suspicious all you tribe people can be."

There it was again—the tribe thing. What else had Jake said? Something about them both being shifters? Whatever weird ideas he had, it seemed that his older sister shared them. And speaking of that, Maddy was angry with herself but she couldn't help the warm rush of relief on finding out that the woman on the other end of the phone wasn't romantically involved with Jake. Which was stupid since she didn't even really know him. *Shouldn't even be making this call in the first place...*

"Hello?" His deep masculine voice cut off her inner monologue of doubt and Maddy felt another irrational surge of emotion—a warm tingling that started in her fingertips and rushed through her body like liquid flame.

"Hello?" It frightened her how shaky her voice sounded. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Hi, this is Maddy—the nurse from last night?"

"I remember you, darlin'. I've been hoping you would call. Are you all right?" The concern in his voice was almost enough to undo her, especially since another cramp had her almost doubled over. God, it felt like someone was sticking knives in her abdomen!

"I...I'm having a lot of pain." She tried not to sound breathless but it was difficult with the cramps shooting through her. "It's really sharp. I should probably go to the ER, I don't know why I'm calling you—"

"Don't go there." His voice was urgent. "That place is full of unprotected humans. Your heat could provoke an uncontrolled change and you'd wind up killing a bunch of them. Probably get yourself shot before everything was said and done."

Though she had no idea what he was talking about, his words sent a chill down her spine. "What...what should I do then? You said you knew something about this—that you knew people who could help me."

"I do," he said at once. "The first thing you need to do is come see me—or I can come see you. We're different tribes but just being around a male shifter should help some—at least it'll soothe the pain for a while."

"I don't know if I can drive," Maddy gasped as another cramp shot through her.

His response was instantaneous. "Where are you? I'll come to you."

Maddy was hesitant. No matter how bad her pain was, was it really wise to invite a strange man into her home?

He seemed to sense her hesitation. "Look, I'll bring my sister with me so we won't be alone if that makes you feel any better. I'd offer to meet you in a public place but what I need to tell you, and show you, has to be kept private."

A fresh cramp, like a knife in her lower belly, decided her. "All right. Here's the address..." She told him and he made a quick noise of affirmation.

"That's not far from my sister's house. We'll be there in ten."

"Wait," Maddy said, before he could hang up. "Would medicine help this? I have some prescription-strength ibuprofen."

"Take it, it might help. But don't take anything narcotic. Really strong pain meds can have the opposite effect, especially if this is your first heat."

Then he hung up, leaving her to wonder again what he was talking about. Well, she supposed she'd find out soon enough. In the meantime she had ten minutes to make herself presentable—if she could even move with the cramps shooting through her.

Somehow she managed to take a quick shower. But by the time she got out the cramps were so bad she could barely manage to wrap herself in her bathrobe and unlock the front door before staggering to the couch. She knew she must look like a mess, her skin pale and pasty and her damp hair straggling down the back of the plush peach robe Kevin had given her as a Christmas present the year before. But the pain was so bad she just didn't care—*couldn't* care—because it was taking all her energy just to breathe though the cramps.

It occurred to her that she was taking a gamble—that whatever was wrong with her might be bad enough to kill her. If what Jake had been telling her turned out to be complete nonsense she might be dead before the night was out.

*Why am I doing this? I'm a trained health professional—I need to be seen by a doctor. This is crazy...* Just as she was reaching for her cell phone to call 9-1-1 there was an abrupt knock on the door.

Maddy's hand fell back in her lap, leaving the cell untouched on the table beside her. "Come in—it's open." Her own voice sounded so weak and sick it scared her. But she didn't have long to think about it because Jake was through the front door almost before she'd finished speaking. Despite the chilly wind that swept in with him, he was only wearing another pair of faded jeans and a plain dark blue T-shirt that clung to the hard muscles of his abdomen and left his large, scarred arms bare.

"God, darlin'—you *do* look bad." He came to her at once and knelt in front of the couch. A matronly looking woman in her forties followed him into the small living room.

"Hi, I'm Jake's sister, Beth." She had dark blonde hair and kindly blue eyes that were red rimmed, as though she'd been crying. Her voice was slightly hoarse as it had been on the phone.

"N-nice to meet you," Maddy managed to gasp out as another cramp hit her.

"Nice to meet you too. My goodness, you poor thing." Beth came over and put a cool hand on Maddy's forehead. "You're burning up too. Jake said this is your first heat—is that right?"

Maddy shook her head. "I-I don't know."

Jake frowned. "I told you, Beth, she doesn't understand what she is. She's been raised human." He turned to Maddy. "Look, I don't want to scare you but this is necessary, darlin'." In a motion almost too fast for her eyes to follow, he scooped Maddy off the couch. Then he settled back onto it, holding her on his lap, cradled like a baby in his massive arms.

"What...what are you doing?" She struggled weakly against him but there wasn't much she could do. *Even if I wasn't sick, he's way too strong.* It was true—his arms felt like warm, flexible iron wrapped around her. He wasn't rough but it was clear there was no getting away.

"Don't fight me—I'm not going to hurt you, darlin'." Jake's deep voice was steady and soothing. "I need you to get a little closer..." He guided her with a gentle hand at the back of her head. "Just rest your head on my shoulder and breathe."

His older sister watched with concern. "It's okay, Maddy. Jake won't hurt you," she promised. "Don't be scared."

She could have saved her words—Maddy was too exhausted to struggle much. "Why are you doing this?" she asked, letting her head rest against his massive shoulder as he seemed to want. The worn cotton of his T-shirt was soft under her cheek but his muscles were like steel beneath it. "I don't...don't understand."

"You need to breathe my scent." With her ear pressed against his chest, his rumbling voice seemed to vibrate her entire body. "It would be better if I was Lynx tribe like you, instead of Wolf. But just the fact that I'm a male shifter will help ease your pains."

"Why?" Maddy insisted, still too tired to move. He *did* smell awfully good—just as he had the night before. It was an entirely masculine scent—a mixture of leather and spice and warm, male musk—and for some reason it seemed to put her at ease.

Now that she had relaxed, Jake seemed more inclined to answer her questions. "When a female shifter goes into heat she needs a male shifter nearby. It's better if they're of the same tribe but in a pinch just about any shifter will do—to a point, anyway. Smelling my scent will help your body relax because it believes relief is nearby."

"Relief?" Maddy craned her head to look up at his face. "What kind of relief?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "Look, I don't want to freak you out here, darlin'. What's say we start slow? Have you had anything to eat or drink since you got up?"

Maddy shook her head. "I just slept for eighteen hours straight. I called you as soon as I woke up. The pain—"

"Woke you up and it was so bad you couldn't get anything. I got it." Jake nodded and turned to his sister. "Beth, can you see if you can find something hot to make? Some soup or coffee?"

"There's tea in the cupboard by the stove," Maddy volunteered. "I don't know about soup. Maybe some canned tomato somewhere."

Beth nodded. "I'm on it. You just relax and try to feel better."

"Thanks." Maddy knew it should make her uncomfortable to have a stranger digging around in her tiny, sparsely stocked kitchen but she just couldn't work up the energy to be upset.

Beth left, taking the hallway that led to the kitchen and dining room. A moment later Maddy heard the distant sound of cupboards opening and closing as she searched for the tea and soup.

"Okay, good." Jake settled more comfortably into the couch. "Beth's great but she's human. There are some things she doesn't need to know."

Maddy looked up at him. "How can she be human if you're a...?"

"A shifter," he said firmly. "And you're one too, darlin', without a doubt. Beth's my half sister—we had the same mom. But her dad is human and mine's a shifter. That makes me a half-breed. But I can tell from your scent you're a purebred Lynx yourself."

"But I don't understand—what's a shifter?" Maddy wished she could sit up in his lap at least, to get a better look at his face but she was just too tired. And it was strangely comfortable being cradled in his arms like this.

Jake sighed, his massive chest moving under her cheek like a bellows. "You ever heard of werewolves?"

The shock of what he was saying gave Maddy the strength to sit up with a jerk, tiredness forgotten. "Werewolves? Like in horror stories and monster movies?"

"Settle down, sweetheart. It's nothing like that at all," he said firmly, pulling her back so that her head was resting on his chest again. "All that Hollywood crap is exactly that—crap. Being a shifter doesn't make you a monster—it just makes you different."

"Different how?" Maddy asked fearfully. What he was saying sounded crazy but then she remembered the way his blue eyes had flashed gold the night before. *Wolf's eyes...* Could it really be true or had she imagined what she'd seen? "I don't know if I believe you," she said in a low voice. "It's just all so...so weird. Like something out of a science fiction novel or something."

He sighed. "I don't blame you for being suspicious. If I was raised human I'd think it was crazy too. Here—sit up again for a minute and look at me."



Maddy did as he said and looked at him, wondering what he was going to show her now.

"Watch my eyes," he said quietly and then the pale, piercing blue turned a sudden bright gold, just as they had the night before. "Now my hand," he said, holding it up between them before she could comment.

As she watched, the long, strong fingers bunched together and dark gray fur began to sprout around his knuckles. *A paw. It's turning into a huge paw!* Maddy watched in amazement as the process continued. He might have done something strange with his eyes—something to do with contacts. But there was no way he could fake this and she knew it. Jake was what he said he was and the part of her that had always been good at science, the part that had gotten her through nursing school with a 4.0, was intrigued.

"That's all I can risk right now," he murmured and she glanced from his paw/hand to his face. There was a look of deep concentration—almost pain—on his strong features.

"Can't you show me more—show me the whole thing?" she couldn't help begging. "It's fascinating."

He gave a short, barking laugh as though she'd asked him to do something slightly crazy. "Risk a complete change with a female in heat sitting on my lap? Sorry, darlin', but there's no way in hell. Your scent affects me as much as mine affects you—it would be way too easy for things to get out of hand." He shook his head and Maddy saw that his hand was just a hand again and his eyes were pale, husky blue instead of deep gold.

"All right." Without his asking her to, she settled back against his chest and took another deep breath of his warm, spicy scent. She supposed the strange display he'd put on for her ought to make her frightened but in fact, it had the exact opposite effect. Now she knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jake was telling her the truth—no matter how crazy it sounded. It made trusting him easier and, despite the strange situation, she felt more comfortable than she had since he'd first stepped in her door and gathered her into his arms.

Jake cradled her carefully and resumed talking, his deep voice taking on an almost scholarly tone. "Let me give you a little background. We shifters are descended from the Native American tribes that lived in the mountains a helluva long time before Columbus sailed the ocean blue."

"Native Americans?" Maddy frowned. "What does that have to do with being a...a shifter?" She was beginning to pick up his lingo and she had to admit that shifter sounded a hell of a lot better than werewolf, or in her own case, werelynx she supposed.

Jake answered her question readily enough. "If you've ever read any Native American folklore you probably came across the belief some tribes have in spirit animals—that is an animal that guides and protects you. Only for us—for the shifter tribes—we carry that animal inside us. And we can and do take the full form of that animal at least once a month, usually during the full moon."

"What animal? A wolf?"

"For me, yeah. For you – a lynx. How you wound up in the human world I have no idea. The closest Lynx settlement is buried deep in the Adirondacks and they're usually very protective of their kits."

"I was raised in orphanages and foster homes," Maddy said in a low voice. "I've tried but I've never been able to track down my biological parents."

Jake shook his head. "I just don't know, darlin'. And I'm sorry to be dumping all this in your lap – I know how crazy it must sound."

"It doesn't exactly sound normal," Maddy admitted. "I mean, I believe you are what you say you are but what about me? I don't look Native American at all – not to mention that I've never turned into a lynx or anything else for that matter."

"Of course not. You can't change before your first heat – no female can." His tone seemed to imply that it was common knowledge. "And as for your looks, you probably had an Irish or Scotch Irish great-great-grandmother who was captured by the Lynx tribe and you got her recessive genes. It is rare though – there aren't many red-headed shifters. You're what – twenty-three?"

"Twenty-five," Maddy answered. "Why?"

"Well, most females come into their first heat sooner than that. But that's in the Wolf tribe – I don't really know all that much about the Lynx people."

"What exactly does that mean – come into heat?" This was something she'd been wanting to know since he first started talking about it. Surely he couldn't mean like a female dog or cat, could he?

He shifted, looking uncomfortable again. "It's kind of like...a second puberty. A female isn't considered sexually mature and ready to mate until she goes through it."

"But what does it mean? Why am I having all this pain? These cramps –" Maddy stopped abruptly as she realized that the cramps were gone. They had been lessening more and more as she and Jake talked and now it had been a good five or ten minutes since she'd had a single pain. "Hey..." She sat up in his lap. "They're gone! And I'm not as tired as I was either." In fact, she felt almost energized, as though someone had given her a B12 shot and her body was just now feeling the boost.

Jake smiled at her. "That's good, darlin', but you need to know it's just a temporary fix. In order to keep you healthy we need to get you down to the Lynx tribe just as quick as we can. Your scent tells me you're pretty far along so time is definitely of the essence here."

Maddy frowned at him, confused. "Why? So I can sit on some other guy's lap and breathe *his* scent until this whole thing is over? Why can't I just stay here with you?" Then she blushed at her own proprietary tone. "I mean, unless you have other things to do. I know you're already going out of your way to help me and we don't really know each other –"

He held up a hand to stop her. "Listen, darlin', it's not that I don't want to help you—there's nothing I'd like better." His eyes flashed gold for a moment and he shifted on the couch again, as though trying to get more comfortable.

"But...?" Maddy looked at him.

Jake cleared his throat. "Two reasons. Number one, the tribes don't mix—it's a taboo that dates back to our roots. We might interbreed with humans sometimes but with each other—*never*. Like mates with like. Lynx with Lynx, Wolf with Wolf and Bear with Bear. And none of the three must mix." He sounded almost as if he was quoting a saying he'd learned as a kid—something so ingrained in him that it was past questioning.

She nodded, accepting his certainty. "Okay, I get it. You're a Wolf and I'm a...a Lynx..." It sounded strange but somehow right coming out of her mouth. Like she had found a piece of herself that had been long hidden and forgotten. "So you can't help me out anymore than you are now."

He nodded. "That's right."

"Okay, so what's reason number two?"

He frowned. "Reason number two is there's a helluva lot more to getting through your first heat than just, uh, sitting on some guy's lap."

"But what else—?"

"Here's your tea, sorry, it took me a while to find everything. I hope you like it sweet—I thought you could use the energy." Beth came in, carefully carrying a mug full of steaming hot tea. "I'm still working on the soup," she said as Maddy took the mug and thanked her. "I should have it done in a bit."

"No problem, Sis. Take your time." Jake gave her a tight smile as she ambled back to the kitchen. Then he turned back to Maddy. "Look, there's no way to sugarcoat this—"

"You're talking about sex, aren't you?" She put the hot tea down on the coffee table without drinking any of it. "God, I feel so *stupid* for not seeing it before. You want me to go find this group of strange, reclusive people who live way out in the Adirondacks and have sex with one of them. Isn't that right?"

"It's not like that," he protested but Maddy barely heard him. Suddenly, she was furious. She struggled to get away but he held her firmly, not letting her go.

"What *is* it like then, Jake? What kind of person do you think I am, anyway? You think because I called you and let you into my house and sat on your lap I go around having sex with just anybody?"

"No, of course not!" He groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose as though trying to drive back a headache. "Look, I haven't known you twenty-four hours yet but I can tell you're a nice kind of girl. But being nice only works for humans. When you're a shifter *biology* rules your body, not morals."

"So now that I've found out what I am, I'm supposed to act like an animal? Like a cat in heat that'll just...just go with any male she comes across?"

"No! Not just any male—someone from your *own tribe*." Jake gestured as though to emphasize his point. "I know it sounds wrong and crazy but you have to believe me, Maddy. You're coming into heat and if you don't get bred by a male shifter—and soon—you could die from the uncontrolled change your body will go through. The first heat is always a very dangerous time in a female shifter's life—some of them don't make it."

"That's...that's insane. I don't accept that." Maddy shook her head stubbornly. It wasn't that she didn't believe him—deep down she knew he was still telling her the truth—she could feel it in her bones. But the reality of it made her frightened and ill. To be so ruled by your body's desires that it made you sick or killed you if you didn't give in... No, it was ridiculous. Unthinkable. "I don't accept this," she said again, glaring at him.

Jake ran a hand through his wild black hair. "Fine—*don't* accept it. It's true whether you accept it or not. Whatever—but now that you're feeling better you need to get off my lap." His deep voice was hoarse and slightly ragged.

"Why—you don't want me near you since you're not the male who's going to...going to..." Maddy groped for words, still seething with anger. What had he called it? "*To breed me?*" she finished at last.

"No!" Jake nearly roared. Then he took a deep breath as though trying to control himself and went on in a calmer tone. "No, darlin', it's not that. It's just...strong emotions make a shifter's scent spike."

"So?" Maddy looked at him blankly. What was he trying to say?

"So, remember I told you your scent affects me as much as mine affects you? Well, now that you're all worked up you smell good—damn good—and it's hard for me to be close to you without reacting to it."

For the first time Maddy became aware that his lap was somewhat...lumpier than it had been earlier. In fact...*Oh my God, is that his cock? But nobody's that big, are they?* The realization made her cheeks burn with embarrassment and she jumped up, sliding hastily to the other side of the couch.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, all her rage leaking away suddenly to be replaced by embarrassment. "I-I didn't know I was...was doing that to you."

"It's okay." He ran both hands through his hair this time and shifted around some, as though to ease the tension she'd created. "It's not your fault, darlin'. Like I said, it's just biology. You can't help it and neither can I—you're a female coming into heat and I smell like an available male—that's all."

"But you're *not* available, are you?" Maddy said flatly.

Jake held up both hands in a gesture of denial. "No—sorry, darlin'. I can get you where you need to go but I can't help you any more than that."

"I understand." She looked down at her lap, trying to hide the disappointment in her voice. It wasn't that she wanted to sleep with him, she told herself—although she *did* find him more attractive than any man she'd ever known. *And* his scent was pretty much the most delicious thing she'd ever smelled. But all of that was immaterial. It was just that he seemed like a better choice than some stranger she'd never met before.

And maybe it was the way Jake had held her and comforted her or the intimate way they'd been talking but she felt like she knew him—really *knew* him in a way she'd never known another person before—even Kevin who she'd nearly married. Come to think of it, *especially* Kevin. *Probably it's like he said—just my body reacting to his body because of my...my situation*, she told herself. *My heat.*

"Hey." Jake scooted over until he was sitting right next to her. "Don't think for a minute I don't want you, Maddy. If it wasn't for the damn taboo..." He shook his head, a frustrated look passing over his face. "Damn, if only you were a Wolf—or if I was a Lynx..."

"Then I wouldn't be off limits?" she asked hesitantly.

"No. Then you wouldn't be off limits." His voice was low and rough and his eyes flashed from pale blue to deep gold as he spoke. "You don't know how much I wish that was true, darlin'. You're goddamn gorgeous and your scent is driving me crazy right now."

Maddy blushed harder and put a hand self-consciously to her hair. "It's nice of you to say all that—especially when I'm such a mess."

"You're not a mess—you just don't have a bunch of makeup plastered on your face or your hair all...all poofy." He gestured at his own spiky hair in a way that made Maddy laugh.

"Nope, it's definitely anything but poofy. Tangled and crazy-looking but not poofy." She grew suddenly serious. "Jake, do I *really* have to do this? I mean, I feel like I can trust you and I believe what you've said and what you've shown me but...but I..."

"You're scared, aren't you?" he asked softly, leaning down to get a better look at her face.

Maddy looked down at her lap, her fingers picking aimlessly at the peach fabric of her robe. "Yeah, I am." She was but not just for the reasons he thought.

Aside from being terrified about sleeping with a stranger, she'd never been much good at sex. In fact, to be honest she was downright *awful*. And now to hear that she had to go find some strange man to have sex with because she was in heat and he happened to have the right genes to...to *breed* her... It was dreadful. *I hope he doesn't mind being disappointed, whoever he is*, she thought, remembering her disastrous sex life with Kevin. *I doubt this is going to be much fun for him. Not that it's going to be a picnic for me either. God, I can't believe I'm actually considering doing this crazy thing.*

"Hey, sweetheart—look at me." Jake's blue eyes were serious and steady. "You don't have to be frightened. I'll take you to the Lynx tribe myself and stay with you all

the way. I swear I won't let anyone hurt you—I'd rip their head off before I'd let that happen."

Maddy tried to smile. "Thanks but unless you can go with me into the bedroom or wherever we're going to, uh, you know..." She shrugged listlessly.

Jake sighed. "Yeah, you have a point, darlin'. I can't follow you there." His big hands bunched into fists. "But I swear to God, whoever you end up with, if he doesn't treat you right—"

"The way *you* would treat me?" Maddy didn't know why she kept pushing it. He'd already said he couldn't help her, couldn't be with her the way she apparently needed a man to be. Maybe it was just his scent and her own rampaging hormones, driving her on, making her say things she should have kept to herself. "I'm sorry," she said, feeling ashamed for throwing herself at him. "I shouldn't have said that."

"You can say anything you want to me, darlin'. I don't mind," Jake said earnestly. "You know, the females who are raised in the tribe always have older women to explain all this to them and help them through it." He sighed. "I'm sorry all you've got is me. I know this must come as a shock to you, being raised human and all."

"It *is* pretty weird. I'm still kind of trying to wrap my head around it." Maddy smiled at him. "But don't think I don't appreciate your help. I mean, if you hadn't recognized me last night...hadn't seen what I was...what I *am*..."

"Hadn't *smelled* what you are is more like it. Here you were chasing me down and I was mad as hell but the minute I smelled you all I could think about was how much I—" He stopped abruptly, shaking his head. "Anyway, it was real obvious you were a shifter."

"I wish you'd found me before—or someone had. I've always felt like I didn't belong—like I didn't quite fit in with anyone around me," Maddy said softly.

"I wish I would have found you sooner too, Maddy." Jake reached out to take her hand and the skin-to-skin contact seemed to ignite the same tingling fire she'd felt the night before when he touched her.

Maddy gasped as the pleasurable warmth began to creep up her arm. "Do you feel that? That feeling when we touch?"

"Mmm-hmm." He nodded, not letting go of her hand.

"Why...what is it?" The fire was spreading over her chest now, making her nipples hard under the fuzzy robe, making her remember she was naked beneath the soft peach fabric.

"Mating hormones. Sexual attraction." His eyes blazed gold again and his voice was deep and rough.

"Taboo attraction, I guess." She felt as if she were drowning in the pure gold of his gaze and the fire was growing hotter now, making its way to the cleft between her legs. Her pussy felt wet and swollen again, as it had when she'd woken from The Dream earlier.

"Mmm-hmm." He nodded again but didn't drop her hand.

"You never told me...never explained why this is so necessary. Why the...uh, breeding helps when a woman—a female—is in heat." Maddy hoped her voice wasn't too breathless—she was trying to sound normal despite the way her heart was pounding in every part of her body at once.

Jake shrugged, his golden eyes half-lidded as he continued to hold her hand, caressing it and massaging it with his own. "People—shifters—used to think it was part of the magic—the spirit animals begging for union. Male and female aren't complete without each other so the female going into heat forces them to come together. When the female opens herself to the male, they become one."

Maddy took a deep breath, trying not to imagine "opening" herself for Jake. "I... guess that sounds reasonable."

He shrugged. "From a mystical standpoint, sure. From a scientific standpoint we're pretty sure it's biology. See, shifters have a really low birth rate. And when a female goes into heat the only thing that stops the pain is the male's seed inside her. That helps increase the odds of conception—which are still pretty low to tell the truth—and keeps the tribe from dying out."

"The male's seed *inside* her?" His words were like an ice-cold bucket of water over her head. Maddy pulled her hand away abruptly, severing the warm, intimate connection. "So I not only have to have sex with a stranger, I have to have *unprotected* sex?"

Jake grimaced apologetically. "Bareback is the only way to go when you're in heat, darlin'—it's the one thing that eases the pain. But like I said, the odds of conception are really low and at least you don't have to worry about STDs because shifters don't get them."

"But I've never...I mean, it's not like I've been with a whole bunch of guys because I haven't, but even with my ex-fiancé we always, *always* used protection." A lump of panic was forming in her throat. She'd seen the results of too many unwanted pregnancies growing up in foster care and too much disease as a nurse to want to risk either one.

Jake looked at her sympathetically but shook his head. "Well you can't this time. I'm sorry, Maddy, but that's the way things are with us."

Suddenly it was all too much. She'd been willing to go along with him and do as he said when she was having the searing cramps in her lower abdomen. But now that they were gone it just seemed silly to go through with the whole frightening, embarrassing ritual Jake seemed to think was necessary.

"Maybe that's the way things are for *you*." Maddy shook her head. "But *not* for me. I've never had unprotected sex and I'm not about to start now."

"Oh no? What are you going to do then?" His voice was mild but he was frowning.

"Nothing." Maddy took a sip of the now-tepid, overly sweet tea and made a face, setting it back down on the coffee table. "I'm feeling a lot better now—perfectly fine. In

fact, I don't think any of this – going to find the Lynx tribe, trying to find a man who's willing to...to be with me – is necessary at all."

He frowned. "You don't, huh?"

Maddy lifted her chin defiantly. "No, I don't. It seems ridiculous to put myself through some long road trip and go through all this...this unpleasantness with some stranger I've never seen in my life when I feel perfectly *fine*."

She expected a fight but instead Jake just sat back on the couch and nodded. "Okay then, darlin'."

Maddy looked at him suspiciously. "You're not going to give me a hard time about this?"

"Why should I?" He shrugged. "Why don't you go get dressed? When you come back you can eat that soup Beth is taking forever to make you and we'll talk about it."

"All right." Maddy was still surprised but she wasn't about to show it again. If he didn't want to fight with her, so much the better. She rose from the couch with no difficulty at all, and nodded at him before walking back to her bedroom.

She really *was* feeling good – better than she had been for months, in fact. It was like a low level depression that had been with her so long she didn't notice it anymore had suddenly lifted and the cramps were completely gone too.

*Fine, I'm perfectly fine*, she told herself as she walked back to her room with her head held high. *And there's no need to put myself through some crazy ritual with a man I don't even know.*

There was no way she was taking a road trip to the Adirondack Mountains to go have unprotected sex with a stranger, Maddy told herself firmly. No way in hell.



## Chapter Four

She found a lacy pink bra and panty set in her underwear drawer. She'd bought it as a treat for herself after the breakup with Kevin and never worn it—only washed it once and put it away. The pretty new underwear she'd forgotten about brightened her day. But as she put it on, she was a little disturbed to notice her nipples were darker than their usual pale pink. Was it some kind of hormonal thing? Something to do with being in heat? But she pushed the thought away quickly. *I'm feeling so much better now – it's probably just a lingering aftereffect, nothing to be concerned about.*

By now she was almost certain that the heat or breeding time or whatever you wanted to call it had completely passed. She knew that Jake had warned her that being around him was just a temporary fix but the more she thought about it, the more certain she was that he must be wrong—at least in her case.

Hadn't he said that shifters intermarried with humans? Well that was probably what had happened with her parents—or even her grandparents. Maybe he was wrong about her being a purebred Lynx. Maybe she was a half-breed like him or maybe not even that much. Maybe she had just enough shifter blood to give her a few problems but not enough to cause an actual crisis. And look how easily and quickly her physical symptoms had cleared up—all she'd needed to do was be near Jake a little while and *presto*—she was completely cured.

Probably she would never change into any kind of animal either. Obviously Jake could do it—he'd shown her as much with his hand-to-paw-and-back-again demonstration. But Maddy just couldn't visualize her own body changing shape like that. It was silly to even consider it—ridiculous.

*Fine, I'm fine. Fine, fine, fine,* she told herself firmly and with every repetition she believed it more.

Her thoughts kept flowing in the same comforting groove as she began to get dressed. Her favorite jeans first, the ones that made her ass look good. And then... *Hmm, which sweater?* The pale blue turtleneck looked nice with her skin tones but it was always a little warm to wear. The deep green V-neck was a button down cardigan type and she loved how soft and fuzzy it was against her skin. *No point in picking one before I get my hair done, anyway.*

Humming to herself, Maddy picked up her brush from the tiny dresser with peeling white paint and a warped mirror sitting beside her bed. She'd gotten it at a garage sale after the breakup. Like almost everything else in her bare, utilitarian apartment, she was just using it until she could get something better.

With slow, even strokes she began sweeping the brush through her long red waves. Her hair was the color of a candle flame, a golden red that just missed being any kind of

orange, which Maddy had long considered her best feature. She reached automatically for some bobby pins to put it up and then decided abruptly to leave it down instead, now that it looked presentable.

In fact, she felt so good that she decided to put on a little makeup. Not that she was trying to lure Jake into anything—she wasn't. After all, he'd made it more than plain they couldn't be together and it wasn't like she *wanted* to be with him or anyone else, anyway. But it was nice to feel pretty once in a while—and there was no harm in it either. It wasn't false advertising when the man she wanted to look nice for was completely off limits and they both knew it.

*I'm not doing it for him, anyway,* she told herself, pursing her lips to put on a pale pink lip gloss. *I'm doing it for myse –*

The cramp hit her with such force that she fell to the floor, a breathless scream leaving her throat. The lip gloss dropped from her nerveless fingers and rolled under the dresser, forgotten.

Maddy writhed on the hardwood floor, clutching her belly. God, the pain—the *pain*. It was worse than before—a hundred times worse. It was like a knife—no, a saw. A saw with jagged, rusty teeth ripping her up inside with slow, sadistic strokes. She was going to pass out. She was going to die. She—

"Maddy? Are you okay?" Jake's urgent knock on her door barely penetrated the haze of agony. Her world had narrowed down to just taking her next breath, to living through the jabs from the red hot poker that someone had somehow buried in her pelvis.

And then he was beside her, scooping her up off the floor and holding her close to his broad chest. "It's okay. It's gonna be okay," he murmured into her hair. "Breathe, darlin'. Just breathe."

Maddy did as he said, burying her face in the warm scratchy skin of his throat and breathing in his spicy, masculine scent as deeply as she could. But still she couldn't get close enough. She gripped his hard shoulders with her fingertips and pressed herself against him, feeling her breasts flattened against the broad planes of his chest and the slight scratch of his stubble against her cheek as she made him the sole focus of her world. Thinking was almost impossible but somehow her body knew what it needed to be well again—and what she needed was Jake as close to her as possible. For a moment she had the crazy urge to pull off her bra and try to get his T-shirt off too. It wasn't just his scent she wanted—needed—it was skin-to-skin contact and his muscular arms against her bare back just didn't seem to be enough.

Maddy might have followed her crazy impulse to get them both undressed but after a long, agonizing moment the cramp began to ease and sanity reasserted itself. She sagged against the hard wall of Jake's chest gratefully, aware that her cheeks were wet with tears and not caring. She also didn't care that she was topless except for her lacy pink bra, having never gotten around to picking a sweater to wear before the cramp hit her. Nothing mattered now but the scent of his skin invading her senses, the warmth of

his big body surrounding her, his large, gentle hands caressing her bare back, soothing her as he whispered in her ear that everything was going to be all right, that everything was fine...

"You knew," she whispered when she finally pulled away from him. "You knew that was going to happen, didn't you?"

He nodded, looking regretful. "I was pretty sure, yeah."

"Why?" Maddy shook her head. "Why did you just let me go and pretend I was fine?"

"I wasn't the one pretending that, darlin'," he pointed out gently. "As to why, I can tell you're a 'show me' kinda girl. I can talk 'til I'm blue in the face but unless you can see for yourself that what I'm saying is true it won't do a damn bit of good."

"You're right," Maddy admitted ruefully. "But I still think you could have given me some warning. Those were the worst cramps yet—much worse than what I was having when you first came."

He looked concerned. "Pain getting worse, huh? That's not a good sign. We *really* need to get going, darlin'. It takes hours to reach the Lynx tribe and that's in good weather. It's already getting dark and it was starting to snow when we drove up here. Who knows what the roads are like by now?"

"All right." Maddy felt defeated. "We'll go. But just out of curiosity, what would happen if we didn't? If I chose to ignore the pain and just didn't go to the Lynx tribe for some reason?" She couldn't imagine ignoring a pain like the one she'd just had but she wanted to know the consequences if she decided to try to defy her new-found second nature.

Jake frowned. "The pain would keep growing and changing as your body demanded release. Eventually the stress of it would trigger an uncontrolled change. That's bad—especially the first time you change."

"Change?" Maddy asked.

"Into your beast," he said as though it was the most natural thing in the world. "Letting your spirit animal—your beast—get control of you instead of the other way around can be fatal. If not for you, then for any prey you can find in the vicinity. And believe me, prey includes humans after you shift forms because they smell weak and you're starving from all the energy you just expended."

Maddy felt sick. "So I'd either die trying to change into a lynx or change successfully and go on a killing spree?"

He nodded. "That's about the size of it, darlin'. So you see why it's important we get on the road and get going. We've got a lot of hard driving to do and we're racing the clock—your biological clock, that is."

She laughed harshly. "And here I thought I didn't have to worry about that until I was in my forties."

Jake looked serious. "Afraid not. From now until you're past breeding age—probably the next twenty-five years of your life—you'll have to pay attention to your body's urges and needs carefully. A shifter can't afford to ignore their drives."

"What about male shifters?" Maddy asked, looking up at him with narrowed eyes. "Do they go through anything like this? Do *they* go into heat?"

He shook his head. "Not exactly. See, for females, they go into heat once a month—"

"Hold it—once a month?" Maddy shook her head. "So this is not an isolated incident? It's something I'll have to deal with continuously?"

Jake nodded. "Afraid so, darlin'."

Maddy sighed. This was just getting better and better. "Okay, I don't even know what to *think* about that right now. Just...go on—you were saying about male shifters?"

Jake sighed and shifted his grip on her. He was still holding her easily in a way that had begun to feel almost normal to Maddy. But his casual posture belied the warmth that was radiating between them again as his bare arms touched her bare back. "As I was saying, male shifters don't go into heat, not like female shifters do. But they do react whenever they're close to a female in heat."

She looked up at him. "React how?"

His eyes were half-lidded and deep gold when he answered. "How do you think, darlin'? They get ready to service her."

"Service her?" Maddy knew what he was talking about but she wanted to hear him say it. Wanted to hear the words from his mouth in that deep, quiet voice.

Jake didn't disappoint her. "Fuck her," he murmured, holding her gaze with his own. "The scent of a female in heat provokes an extremely strong response from any unmated male. He feels the urge to take the female. To taste her and mark her with his scent—to fuck her so hard and long and deep no other male in a fifty-mile radius will dare come near her."

The breath left Maddy's body in a rush and she felt like every square inch of her skin was blushing. The warm tingling current between herself and Jake seemed to reach a fever pitch that made her throb all over. "I think I'm feeling better now. Maybe...maybe you should put me down now," she whispered.

"Sure, darlin'. Need to get going anyway." Gently, Jake deposited her on her own two feet and Maddy swayed slightly as he stepped away. Already she missed that warm, tingling connection but what was the point when nothing could come of it?

"How...how will we get there?" she asked, turning and grabbing a sweater at random—the green button-down cardigan with the V-neck—and pulling it on.

"Well, Beth and I came in one car—hers. And I left my truck back at my cabin..."

"We can take mine." Maddy frowned. "Except I don't have chains on the tires yet—how bad is the snow?"

Jake frowned. "We'll have to see. Might need to detour around to my place and change cars. It's only fifteen minutes out of the way—hopefully we'll have time."

Maddy didn't like the worried look on his face. "Surely I'll be okay as long as I'm with you, breathing your scent. Won't I?"

"Like I said, darlin'—it's a temporary fix. The scent of a male will only hold off your heat for so long. Because eventually your body is going to expect you to deliver what the scent has been promising."

Maddy shivered. "Okay, I got it, we have to hurry. Do I have time to pack a few things?"

He frowned. "Very few. Don't worry if you forget something—the Lynx tribe will supply everything you need."

"Everything I need whether I want it or not," Maddy muttered to herself. Grabbing her old blue backpack from her nursing school days, she was in the process of going through her dresser for a couple of changes—who knew how long she'd be stuck with the Lynx tribe after all—when another cramp hit.

Jake was by her side immediately, catching her before she could crumple to the floor. "This isn't good, darlin'," he said, lifting her into his arms. "You shouldn't be having cramps with me still so close to you."

"Meaning what?" Maddy gasped as the cramp eased.

"Meaning your heat might be further progressed than I thought. We need to go *now*." He scooped her up and carried her out into the living room, her backpack forgotten.

Beth met them, a steaming bowl of soup in her hands. "Is everything okay?" she asked anxiously, looking at Maddy's white face.

"She's having a hard time. I need to get her to the Lynx tribe as soon as possible." Jake nodded at hook on the wall where Maddy's coat was hanging. "Help me get something warm on her, will you, Sis?"

"Sure." Beth put down the soup and bustled over to get the coat. She came back to Maddy and started to thread it over her free arm, but Maddy balked at being dressed like a toddler.

"Thanks but I can manage myself. Let me down for a minute, Jake," she insisted weakly.

He frowned but set her gently on her feet. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"For the moment." Maddy sighed and began putting on the coat, assisted by Beth who was hovering anxiously nearby. "Look, if we're taking my truck we need the keys. They're on the top of my dresser in my bedroom."

"I'll get them. Call if you need me." Jake ran into the bedroom. She was about to shout that the keys were on the right side of the dresser by her jewelry box when Beth surprised her by gripping her arm urgently.

"The boy Jake brought into the hospital last night – do you know what happened to him?" Her blue eyes, so much like Jake's, were full of fear.

Maddy was confused for a moment—so much had happened that she'd almost forgotten her reason for chasing Jake out into the snow in the first place the night before. She realized now she hadn't asked him anything else about the mysterious circumstances and the supposedly unknown patient he'd brought in. She'd been too concerned with learning her own secret identity to even think about it.

"Um, I think they kept him so he was probably in stable condition," she told Beth. "Anyone in really bad shape has to get airlifted to UVA because they're a class one trauma center. We're only a class three."

"Thank you." Beth sniffed back tears. "I...whenever I call they won't tell me anything."

"Who is he? They ought to let you know if he's family." Maddy frowned but Jake's older sister only shook her head. Maddy wanted to ask her more but just then Jake reappeared, the keys to her truck in one big hand.

"Ready. Let's get you where you need to go." He started to pick her up again but Maddy waved him off.

"I can walk," she said irritably. Turning to Beth, she gripped the older woman's hand. "Thanks for everything," she said softly. "And if you need me to make a call and find out some information for you I can do that – no problem."

"Thank you, Maddy. That means a lot to me." There were tears standing in Beth's blue eyes and her voice was hoarse again from crying. "I may take you up on that later but you have to get yourself seen to first. I may not be one of the tribe people myself but I know just by being around Jake that this heat thing is nothing you want to play around with."

"So I gather." Maddy felt cold despite her green sweater and heavy winter coat. "Sorry I didn't get to eat the soup you made."

Beth smiled through her tears. "That's okay. It was mostly busy work anyway. I knew Jake wanted to be alone with you. I can tell when he's interested in a girl—even though it's been awhile."

"That's enough, Beth." Jake frowned at his sister but she only smiled and patted his arm.

"Don't get all growly and big-bad-wolf on me, Jakey. I can see plain as plain you like her – what's the point in hiding it?"

He looked grim. "The *point* is she's Lynx tribe and I'm a big bad Wolf, as you put it. You know what that means, Beth."

His sister frowned. "Oh dear, that *does* complicate things." She sighed. "Nothing can ever be simple with you shifters, can it?"

"I'm beginning to think not," Maddy muttered. Her cheeks were burning and she couldn't look at Jake. Somehow hearing his sister confirm that he was attracted to her

was worse than their stilted conversation about breaking the tribal taboos earlier. A lot worse.

"We'd better get going." Jake ushered them out the front door and locked it securely behind them. "Thanks for coming with me, Sis. Can you get home all right?"

"As long as this snow doesn't get any worse I'll be fine. I'm mostly worried about you two, going all the way to the Adirondacks."

Maddy peered out into the deepening gloom where snow flurries were swirling in the frigid air. "There's already over two inches on the ground. I hope my truck can make it."

"I hate to do it but we'll have to stop and get mine." Jake frowned. "Come on, let's go."

Maddy turned to follow him toward her small green truck but Beth surprised her by giving her a quick hug.

"Take care of yourself, honey," she murmured in Maddy's ear.

"Thanks." Maddy smiled. "You too."

Beth sighed. "You know, I'm real sorry you and Jake are two different tribes. It's been so long since he set his heart on a girl. It doesn't seem fair you two can't be together just because—"

"Enough, Beth. We really have to go." Jake was scowling but he pulled his older sister into a gentle hug anyway. "Take care of yourself. I'll call when I can."

"I will too when I find anything out," Maddy promised her. "I've got your number in my phone."

"Thank you." Beth squeezed her hand, her blue eyes suddenly shiny with tears again. "I'd really appreciate that, Maddy."

Maddy wanted to ask her again who was the boy Jake had brought in—she had a feeling he wouldn't be open to the question himself. But he was already tugging her toward the truck and there was no time to say anything else. So she gave Beth, who she was really starting to like, one more smile and then let Jake bundle her into the passenger side of the cab.

He turned on the heater as soon as the engine warmed up—for her benefit more than his, she was sure, since he didn't seem cold at all despite the thin T-shirt he wore with no coat. Maddy put on her seatbelt and let the warm air wash over her. "How did you know this was my truck?" she asked as he turned onto the road.

Jake flashed her a grin. "Elementary, my dear Watson. It was the only truck in the lot."

"Oh." Maddy felt stupid.

"Plus, it smelled like you." Jake laughed at the face she made. "Don't worry, darlin'—it's a good smell. A *very* good smell."

Feeling uncomfortable, Maddy changed the subject. "So are we far from your cabin?"

He shrugged. "Not far. I'm just a few miles away from the hospital, actually."

"Oh." She thought about asking if he'd carried the mysterious patient all the way from his cabin to the ER entrance of the hospital and decided against it. From the secretive way Beth had acted, it wasn't a subject Jake would appreciate her bringing up. Instead she looked out the window at the trees and houses flying by in the gloom and tried not to think of what was waiting for her at the end of this strange journey.

After a moment Jake cleared his throat. "Whatcha thinking, darlin'? Worried about the Lynx tribe? Because you shouldn't be—I'm sure they'll welcome you with open arms. None of the tribes have too many members left so you'll be like a gift to them."

"Sure, until they get to know me." Maddy clamped her jaw shut, wondering why she'd said that. There was no point in airing her insecurities.

But it was too late. "Hey." Jake put a hand on her knee, making her jump. "Why wouldn't they like you after they get to know you, darlin'?" he asked softly. "I'm getting to know you and I like you just fine."

"Yes, but you're not the one who's going to...going to breed me." The word still stuck in Maddy's throat but she forced it out anyway. Now that they were actually on the road and headed for the Lynx settlement, the reality of what she was doing was hitting home. *God, can't believe I'm actually going to do this!* But what choice did she have?

Jake's deep voice was quiet and filled with something that might be regret. "No, I'm not the one who's going to be with you, darlin'. But whatever male you end up with is going to be honored. We don't take a female's heat lightly, you know. The breeding isn't just some casual thing—it's a ritual—the male worshipping the female's body with his own, giving of himself to ease her pain and make them one."

"Well what if he doesn't *want* to be one with me once he...once he does what he has to do?" Maddy burst out, turning to him. "I mean, I wouldn't blame him if he didn't."

"Why wouldn't he?" Jake asked evenly. "What male in his right mind wouldn't want to make love to a beautiful woman like you, darlin'?"

"No one would. And I can't blame them because...because my inside doesn't match my outside." Maddy gestured to her body, still swaddled in her thick winter coat. Truth to tell she was getting a little warm so she wiggled out of it and watched from the corner of her eye as Jake's gaze flicked appreciatively to where the tight green sweater clung to the curves of her breasts.

"Your outside certainly is very tempting, darlin'," he murmured. "But I haven't found any reason yet to think you're any less beautiful on the inside."

"It's not my personality I'm worried about—well, not all of it, anyway. You look at me and think sex, right?" Maddy sighed. "I mean, I'm sure that's what most men think when they look at a woman but still... It's like a promise. A promise my body makes that I can't keep."

Jake raised one black eyebrow at her. "Meaning?"



"Meaning that no matter how much I try I can't get...can't get turned on." Maddy stared straight out the windshield, blushing furiously. "It's the reason I broke up with my fiancé. He said I was frigid and...and he was right." She clenched her fists at her sides. "So I hope this Lynx guy I'm going to end up with doesn't mind being disappointed because I'm afraid he won't get much satisfaction out of breeding me— whoever he is."

She'd expected a sympathetic speech or maybe another pat on the knee but to her surprise Jake threw back his head and chuckled. Maddy turned to him, glaring. Here she was baring her soul to him and he was *laughing* at her. Bastard!

"Thanks for being so *sensitive*," she hissed.

"Sorry, darlin', but you're just so backwards it's a little funny." He shook his head, still chuckling a little. "You're *not* frigid—that's pretty much the exact opposite a shifter's nature." He gave her a direct look. "We like to fuck. A lot. And that's all the tribes, not just mine."

Maddy felt a blush heating her cheeks. "Well I still don't see—"

"You're not frigid," he cut her off, shaking his head. "No way in hell, darlin'. You're just not sexually mature yet—or you weren't until you started coming into heat."

"But...but Kevin—my ex—tried everything," she protested. "And I do mean *everything* to turn me on. And none of it worked."

"Because your body wasn't ready yet," Jake said calmly. "Look, I promise you, darlin', when you come into your full heat—when you reach the crisis point—you won't have any trouble getting hot. The only problem you'll have is getting enough to satisfy you."

"You mean...I'll need to...to be bred more than once?" Maddy had been entertaining hopeful visions of a very quick and impersonal bout of sex in a dark room with whoever she was assigned by the Lynx tribe. But Jake's next words melted those hopes like ice cream dropped on a hot sidewalk.

"Oh no, darlin'. It's usually a marathon session. He...the male you're with...will probably take you over and over in lots of different positions."

Maddy's cheeks were flaming. "But...why?"

"To try to get his seed as deep inside you as he can." He cleared his throat and gave her a half-lidded glance. "Don't worry that you'll be embarrassed or upset. Your body will take over your mind at that point and all you'll feel is pleasure and the need to be bred."

"If you say so." Maddy had a hard time imagining being so hot that she had no shame and only wanted to have sex. But Jake seemed to know what he was talking about.

"I can tell you're skeptical, darlin', and I understand why. It's because you've never been turned on before. Let me guess, you read things or see things other people seem to think are sexy and they leave you cold—right?"

Maddy thought of the multiple porno movies Kevin had subjected her to and nodded. "Pretty much."

"And then you'd go to have sex and it would hurt because you couldn't loosen up. I'm right again, aren't I?" Jake gave her a shrewd look.

She blushed, thinking this time of how tight and dry she always was. "Um, yes. That's right."

"All that's about to change," Jake promised her. "When you come into your full heat your body will be ready—more than ready—to accept a male."

Maddy felt frustrated. "But...but how will I *know*?"

"You'll know." He sounded absolutely certain. "When you reach the crisis point—the time in your heat where it's either breed or change—there will be definite physical changes that give it away. And the pains you've been having will change too. Look, darlin', being a male I'm really not the right one to describe it to you. But I promise you, you won't have a problem. Okay?"

"Okay." Maddy sighed but it turned into a yawn. "God, I shouldn't be but I'm *really* sleepy." All the energy she'd felt back at her apartment seemed to have leaked away, leaving her as exhausted as she had been after her shift the night before.

Jake patted her knee again. "That's all right, darlin'. Being in heat takes a lot out of a female. We'll be at my place in no time and I'll grab you some pillows for the trip. Until then, just lay your head back on the seat and relax."

"Thanks." Maddy smiled at him gratefully and slid lower in her seat to take him up on his offer. Jake reached over and took her hand, entwining their fingers. She gave his hand a light squeeze and he squeezed back. It seemed funny how quickly she'd gotten used to being close to Jake—by rights he should still be a stranger. But that wasn't how he felt to her when she breathed in his spicy, masculine scent. He felt familiar and wonderfully safe—like coming home to a warm house after she'd been out wandering in the cold rain, lonely and afraid all her life.

As her eyes fluttered closed, she heard Jake's voice murmuring soothing words. "Sleep well, darlin'," he murmured. "You're all right. I'll keep you safe."

Maddy wanted to thank him but her entire body was heavy with exhaustion and she couldn't force her lips to move. Then sleep took her and she knew no more.

## Chapter Five

"You need it don't you? Need to have your sweet little pussy filled with my cock."

Maddy opens her mouth to deny it but finds she can't. It's true, it's all true. She needs him in her—craves the feel of his thickness filling her so badly she can't stand it. Her body is on fire and his warm, spicy scent is making her wild.

He strokes her nipples gently but the pink buds are so tight with desire that even the lightest touch gives her a tingle of pleasurable pain. Maddy moans, a wordless plea that makes him laugh softly.

"Feels good and hurts at the same time, doesn't it?" he murmurs, stroking lower to cup her sex in one large hand.

"Yes," Maddy whispers. "It does. It hurts. Please..."

"Just wait, darlin', it's going to feel better. I'm gonna make it all better for you," he promises. "Just spread your legs and open up for me—spread open that sweet little pussy and let me fuck you."

Maddy is more than eager to comply. Between her legs she is liquid with desire, her cunt honey coating the soft skin of her inner thighs. She needs him there. Needs his fingers, his tongue, but most especially his cock. Needs to feel him thrusting deep inside her pussy to fill her with his cum. Only then will the painful needing stop. Only then can the fire inside her be quenched...

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A sharp cramp woke her up. And then another one. Maddy opened her eyes, tensing for the next one, anticipating the burning, ripping pain that had accompanied her earlier cramps. But it was different this time. The pain was there but it wasn't the savage, excruciating agony it had been before. This time it was more of a... *More of a needing. A craving, almost*, Maddy thought to herself, stretching on the narrow truck seat, The Dream still fresh in her mind. She was so relieved not to be in terrible pain that she almost didn't care when the next cramp hit—or should she call it the next craving? It was like her body was urging her to do something, something unfamiliar but completely natural and necessary. But what?

As if in answer to her question she felt Jake's hand in her hair and heard his low voice rumble in her ear. "You woke up just in time, darlin'. We're here."

Maddy opened her eyes and looked around groggily. "In the Adirondacks already?"

He gave a short, barking laugh. "I wish. Nope, just at my cabin. We can run in for a minute if you want a bathroom break but then we need to get in my truck and keep moving. We have a long way to go."

"Oh." Maddy felt a stab of disappointment. Still so far away... *Wait a minute*, she told herself. *I should be feeling relief, not disappointment. It's not like I want to do this. The longer I can put it off the better – right?* Right. Just then another cramp hit her and she gasped – there had been nothing gentle about that one. It burned and stabbed like the pains she'd had back at her apartment.

"Maddy?" Jake had been about to get out of the truck but he stopped, looking at her with concern.

"Another cramp," she said, struggling to keep her voice level. "I've been having them since I woke up but this one was bad."

He frowned. "I don't understand it. The truck cab is small enough that you should be smelling my scent with every breath you take."

"I am." Maddy moaned softly as another cramp hit. "They weren't so bad when I first woke up – when I was close to you. But now..."

"Come here, then." He popped her seatbelt and dragged her across the seat, pulling her across his lap. "Better now?" he asked, looking at her anxiously.

Maddy waited for the next cramp but it never came. Instead, a craving so strong she couldn't control it came over her – the craving to touch Jake's bare skin.

Wiggling out of his lap, she pushed up the plain navy blue T-shirt he had on and pressed her cheek to the rock-hard plane of his lower belly. His skin was warm here – almost hot – and his spicy, masculine scent was concentrated and intense, overwhelming her with need.

"Darlin', no – what are you doing?" Jake tried to pull down his shirt but Maddy managed to get in the way so he couldn't.

"Just doing what feels right. Please, Jake, I need you." Pressing closer, she breathed him in. Closer, if she could only get a little closer... *a lot* closer, really. That was what she needed, what she craved...

"Maddy, you have to stop this so we can get on the road." Jake's deep voice sounded strained, as though he was holding himself back in some way. Distantly Maddy felt something hard and hot by her cheek as she rubbed her face against his lower belly but what she was doing felt too right to stop. "I think you're still half asleep, darlin'," He continued, shifting uncomfortably in the seat. "Come on, wake up."

Her eyes fluttered as she forced herself to sit up, away from him. "The Dream...I was having it and then the cramps woke me up," she murmured. "It was so real...like it was really happening. I felt...I feel..." She broke off as another cramp, this one more pain than pleasure, struck. "God...Oh Jake," she gasped as he pulled her close again. "It hurts...hurts when I'm not touching you."

He frowned, his pale blue eyes anxious. "I don't like this, darlin'...breathing my scent should be enough. You shouldn't have to be touching me not to feel the pain. Not unless..."

"Unless what?" Maddy asked, shivering. She was pressed against his chest, afraid to move, afraid that if she lost contact with him the horrible pain would start again.

"Unless you're further along, closer to your crisis point, than I thought you were." Jake ran a hand through his hair. "It can be hard to judge with a female's first heat. Sometimes it takes days, even weeks for her to come to that point. Other times it's more like hours. I thought we had enough time to get you down to the Lynx tribe but now..." He broke off, shaking his head. "No other way to tell except to look," he muttered to himself. "And it's too damn dark out here to see." Gathering Maddy into his arms, he pulled her out of the truck.

"Where are we going?" It was snowing harder now and the sky was almost completely black but she could still see the grim look on his face as he carried her over the white lawn.

"Inside." He nodded at the small, snug-looking wooden cabin Maddy had been too preoccupied to notice before. "There's something I need to see before we go on. *If* we go on. There might not be enough time."

Maddy bit her lip as a shiver of fear ran down her spine. "But we have to go on, don't we? You said if I didn't...if I didn't get bred I could die."

"Don't worry, darlin', I'm not gonna let that happen." Jake's strong features were grim but his blue eyes were tender. "I'll keep you safe, I promise."

Maddy didn't see how he could since he wasn't allowed to breed her himself but another cramp of need washed over her, making it impossible to ask questions.

He carried her into the cabin without another word. Maddy had a confused impression of a neat, cozy kitchen and a table with a red checked tablecloth and a tiny Christmas tree with decorations the size of her thumbnail before they passed into a living room type area with a fireplace in the center of one wall.

Jake sat on a worn brown leather sofa opposite the fireplace. Still holding her tightly, he reached out to snap on a lamp. When the room was lit by a warm, golden glow he settled her so that her head and shoulders were in his lap and looked down at Maddy intently.

"How are you feeling, darlin'?"

"The same. No—worse," she murmured as another cramp ran through her. The pain wasn't as bad when he was holding her but the craving was getting much more intense. Obviously her body needed something, something only Jake could provide. *Except he can't*, she reminded herself, shivering. *He can't so stop thinking about it*. But though she tried to tell herself it was wrong, there was no denying the fact that she was having the urge to get skin-to-skin with him again—an urge that was getting harder to fight every minute.

Jake sighed. "Don't take this the wrong way, Maddy, but I need to see your nipples."

"My...why?" She looked at him, almost surprised enough to forget her craving.

He ran a hand through his hair. "Remember I told you there would be certain physical changes that would let you know if your heat was reaching the crisis point?"

Maddy nodded and moaned softly as another cramp struck. Were they getting closer together? It certainly felt like it.

"Well, the color of your nipples is one indication. So I need to see—all right?"

"All...all right," Maddy whispered, still shivering.

"Okay." He stroked a strand of hair away from her face. "Can you unbutton your sweater or do you need me to?"

"I'll try." But when she reached for the buttons on her dark green sweater, her hands were shaking too badly to manage a single one.

"Here." Jake brushed her hands gently out of the way and unbuttoned the front of her sweater with quick, sure gestures. Maddy moaned again as he parted the green fabric and went to work on her bra. Luckily it opened in the front so he had no trouble at all getting it unhooked.

"God," she gasped as he peeled back the pale pink cups to expose her full breasts. She hadn't realized until it wasn't touching her anymore how much the lace from the bra had been irritating her increasingly sensitive skin. She could almost feel Jake's gaze on her body and for a moment she closed her eyes in mingled embarrassment and relief. It felt so good, so *right*, to be bare in front of him but at the same time she couldn't believe that she was letting him look at her this way. *It's necessary*, she reminded herself. *He said that it's necessary so it must be.*

A murmur of anxiety from him made her forget her inner pep talk and open her eyes. "What?"

"This isn't good, darlin'," he said, raising his head to look at her before letting his gaze travel back to her bare breasts. "Are they usually this dark?" He motioned to her nipples and for the first time Maddy looked down at her chest.

"Oh my God!" She couldn't believe what she was seeing. Her areolas, usually the size of quarters, were now more like silver dollars. Worse, instead of their usual pale, delicate pink, her nipples were a dark, hungry mauve.

"I take that for a no?" Jake said dryly, glancing up at her again.

"No!" Maddy shook her head vehemently. "They're bigger now—they're not usually this big."

"And the color?" he asked softly.

"They're usually the same color as my bra." She indicated the pale pink bra that was folded back to reveal her breasts.

"Are they more sensitive than usual? How does this feel?" Pursing his lips, Jake blew a stream of cool air across the rigid peak of her right nipple.

Maddy gasped and closed her eyes as sensation rushed through her. "God...it hurts but...but it feels like it's not enough at the same time," she moaned. "Like I need more than just—" She opened her eyes and broke off, suddenly embarrassed.

Jake's expression was getting grimmer by the minute. "Okay, these are some pretty strong indications that you're far into your heat—getting close to the crisis point. But I need to know one more thing..." He cleared his throat and looked her in the eye. "How wet are you, Maddy?"

"What?" She felt a rush of embarrassment at the blunt question. "I'm not...I don't get...wet," she protested, forgetting that she'd woken up wet and swollen between her thighs earlier that afternoon before calling him. "I just can't...that's one of my problems."

Jake frowned. "You're at least a little wet, darlin'—I can tell by your scent. What I need to know is how much. If you're just a little damp, that's one thing. But if your pussy is soaked, well, that means the crisis point is closer than we thought."

"I-I don't think..." Maddy reached for the button of her jeans and fumbled helplessly for a moment before giving up. "I can't," she whispered, feeling weak and frightened.

"Will you let me?" Jake looked at her for permission. "I may be able to tell better than you anyway since I've been with a female in heat in the past and this is your first time."

"All...all right." She felt a stab of embarrassment as she realized she'd just given him permission to touch and stroke her in the most intimate possible manner but there was no help for it—they had to know how close she was to the crisis point of her heat.

"Here, darlin'." Jake positioned her so that she was lying across the couch with her head on his lap, making sure she was comfortable before he started. Then slowly, as though trying not to frighten her, he unfastened her jeans and slid his hand inside the denim.

"It's okay," he murmured as his fingers slipped under the front of her pale pink panties and slid slowly down. "I won't hurt you, darlin'. Just try to relax."

"I-I'll try." Maddy bit her lower lip as she felt his fingers slide lower, past her neatly trimmed thatch of reddish-gold curls to cup the mound of her sex.

Jake was still for a moment, obviously giving her time to adjust to having his hand between her legs. "All right, darlin'," he said, his deep voice low and reassuring. "I need you to spread your legs a little for me now. Just have to slide my fingers inside you once so I can see how wet and hot you are. Your internal temperature goes up at the crisis point too."

"Okay," Maddy whispered. She couldn't believe the position she was in. Lying bare breasted on Jake's couch with his hand down the front of her jeans cupping her naked cunt was certainly not how she'd thought to spend her night. And yet despite her embarrassment she was excited too. Excited and, yes, undeniably aroused. More than she had ever been in her life and he hadn't even really touched her that much yet. Kevin

had gotten her into all kinds of ridiculous, uncomfortable positions trying to elicit the kind of response she'd had to simply having Jake blow on her nipples.

"All right now," Jake murmured softly, breaking her train of thought. "Spread your legs for me, darlin'. Just open up and let me touch you."

Moaning softly, she tried to do as he said but it was hard to be open enough with the tight denim in the way. "Maybe...maybe I should take off my jeans," she said, hoping she didn't sound as wanton as she felt.

Jake was quiet and still for a moment. "Do you want to? It would help if I could see the inside of your pussy—to see if it matches your nipples. That's another strong indicator of the crisis point coming up."

"If you'll help me take them off—I know we need to know how far along I am." Maddy was feeling the urgent need for skin contact with him again and it stood to reason that if she was *showing* more skin he would be *touching* more skin. A part of her couldn't believe she was thinking like this but it didn't stop her from wriggling out of the tight blue jeans with Jake's help.

He groaned softly when he saw her naked from the waist down. "God, you're beautiful, darlin'. All that soft, creamy skin and those long legs."

"Thank you," Maddy said shyly. "I-I think I can spread wide enough for you now."

"I think you can," he agreed softly. "All right, darlin', are you ready? I'm just going to look at you first."

"I'm ready, Jake. And I'm not afraid." Maddy spread her thighs, welcoming his hand back. "Do...do what you need to do."

He reached down carefully, one muscular arm flush against her belly. Delicately, using his thumb and forefinger he parted her swollen pussy lips and studied her inner folds. "Just what I thought," he murmured at last.

"What?" Maddy craned her neck, looking down the length of her body to where he was touching her.

"You're dark pink here too, darlin'," Jake said, nodding to indicate her inner cunt. "And see how hot and puffy your soft little pussy lips are?" He traced them as he spoke, making Maddy bite back a moan.

"Yes," she managed to say at last. "They're not...not usually like that. Why...?"

"Your body's getting ready to be bred, ready to take a man's cock deep inside you," Jake said, answering her unspoken question matter-of-factly. "Now, what about your sensitivity? Do you usually feel much when you touch yourself here?" He stroked one finger gently over the aching bud of her clit.

"God!" Maddy nearly jumped out of her skin as a bolt of pleasure shot through her like lightening arching through her spine. "No," she gasped when he stopped touching her. "No, I...I'm never very sensitive there."

"But you are now," Jake murmured. It wasn't a question.



"Yes, I..." Maddy swallowed. "That felt so...so...I really felt that. Do you...do you still need to touch me inside?" she asked, hoping the need she felt didn't show too much in her voice.

Jake nodded. "Mm-hmm. Still need to see how hot and wet you are, darlin'." His deep voice was hoarse as he cupped her again. "I can tell already just from looking that you're further along that I thought. But just to be sure..." Two long, strong fingers slid slowly into the wet depths of her pussy, making Maddy arch her back and moan breathlessly.

"God, Jake, please!" she heard herself begging. "Please, that's so... Oh!"

"Easy, darlin'. Just like I thought—you're burning up and damn wet," Jake murmured. He started to withdraw his fingers but Maddy gave a little cry of protest and tilted her pelvis to keep them inside.

"Please, Jake," she begged breathlessly. "It...the cramps hurt less when you touch me like that. In fact, they hardly hurt at all."

"Like this?" His eyes blazed gold as he pumped his fingers deep in her wet pussy, thrusting to the end of her channel as Maddy cried out and opened her thighs even wider for him.

"Yes!" she moaned shamelessly. Part of her was shocked at her actions, at the way she was encouraging, even begging for his touch. But another part, an animal lust that had been buried inside her for years and was just now waking up, didn't give a damn. The lust only wanted more...and more...and more. "Don't stop," she begged Jake, pumping her hips in time with his rhythm. "Please, don't stop!"

"I won't, darlin'. Not until you come for me," he growled softly, his golden eyes devouring the sight of her writhing half naked on his lap. "Can you do that, Maddy—can you come for me?"

"I-I don't know," Maddy admitted softly. "I...I've never..."

"Well you're about to," Jake promised her. "Just relax and let me touch you, darlin'. Right now you just need to take the edge off. We'll figure out what we're going to do about your heat a little bit later."

"All right," Maddy murmured, spreading her thighs wider to welcome the fingers stroking into her. She had no idea if she could have an orgasm or even what one felt like but she trusted Jake enough to try. He'd taken her this far and she knew he would do what he promised and keep her safe even if she wasn't sure how he was going to do it.

Jake seemed to know how to touch her in ways she had never thought of before. He alternated deep thrusts that found the end of her channel with light teasing strokes across her swollen clit until Maddy felt like she was going to scream. God it felt so good, so *right* and there was a pressure inside her, a pleasure like nothing she had ever felt building and building like water behind a dam ready to break loose at any minute and wash her away.

Just as she thought she was going to scream from the unrelieved tension, she felt Jake's other big hand caressing her naked breasts. Gently he plucked at her nipples,

giving her just enough stimulation without hurting the tight, sensitive buds. At the same time she felt the blunt pad of his thumb circle her clit, drawing a pattern across her slippery inner folds. Suddenly the pressure became too much.

"Jake...oh God, Jake!" she gasped as the dam broke and a warm flood of sensation washed over her.

"That's right, darlin', come for me," he growled softly, watching her avidly with half-lidded golden eyes. "Just spread your sweet pussy open and let me make you come."

Desperate for more contact, Maddy reached up to him and buried her hands in his wild black hair. Dragging his face down to hers, she kissed him shamelessly as he touched her.

Jake seemed to hesitate at first but then he surged into the kiss, taking her mouth with an abrupt passion that took her breath away. He wrapped one arm around her shoulders and brought her up to deepen the kiss while his other hand kept working between her thighs, his fingers pumping deep in her cunt as her orgasm went on and on.

At last the tide of pleasure seemed to ebb a little and Maddy was able to break the kiss. *God, what did I just do? Did he really make me come?* She was pretty sure he had but the fact that she'd acted so wantonly, had spread her legs and begged him to touch her, dimmed her pleasure in the long-awaited event.

Jake seemed to sense her mood because he removed his fingers and let her relax across his lap. "You okay, darlin'?" he asked quietly.

"Fine." Maddy turned on her side and pulled her legs up, covering herself as best she could.

"You don't look fine to me." Jake's deep voice was skeptical. "Are you upset, darlin'?"

"No...yes..." Maddy sighed in frustration. "I'm sorry I just...I can't believe I did that. I mean I barely know you and then we...I...I can imagine what you must think of me right now."

"Look at me." Jake leaned over and met her eyes. "I think you're a female in heat, doing what comes naturally. Didn't I tell you your body would take over?"

"Yes, but..." Maddy sat up, pulling the sides of her sweater around herself and crossing her legs tightly. "But I guess I didn't believe you," she finished softly.

"Here." Jake pulled a maroon afghan with a dark green pine tree pattern off the back of the couch and draped it over her. "If anyone's to blame it's me, darlin'. I'm sorry if you feel taken advantage of—that wasn't my intention at all."

"No, it's not that." Maddy shook her head. "It's just...I guess I'm not used to having my body react like that to...to being touched. It was incredible and kind of scary."

"The first time always is." Jake smiled at her and patted her afghan-covered leg.

Maddy frowned. "I'm not a virgin, you know."

Jake looked thoughtful. "In a way you are. I know you've had sex before but have you ever really enjoyed it?"

"Never." Maddy shook her head. "But I don't know if I enjoyed what we did just now either. Enjoying something is like...I don't know, enjoying a cool drink on a hot day or watching your favorite movie when it comes on cable. I think it's too mild a word for what I felt when you touched me."

Jake grinned. "Maybe you're right. But the point is, if you've never gotten pleasure from sex before then you were just going through the motions. You can't do that when you're in heat—your body won't let you."

"I can see that." Maddy closed her eyes for a moment, reliving the hungry kiss they'd shared, the delicious drowning pleasure he'd given her so expertly when he made her come. When she opened her eyes again Jake was watching her, his eyes a deep gold.

"How do you feel now, darlin'? Any cramps?"

"No, none." Maddy was surprised. "I didn't even notice but they're gone."

He nodded. "Good. I was hoping that making you come would take the edge off for a little while. Long enough for me to make a few phone calls, anyway."

"Who are you calling?" Maddy asked as he got up and headed back to the kitchen part of the cabin.

"Need to find out if there are any Lynx tribe males in the vicinity," he said, looking back at her. "Your heat is progressing too fast—there's no way we'll reach the Lynx settlement in time."

"But I feel fine now," Maddy objected. "Ever since you made me...since you touched me I feel perfectly normal." She could feel herself blushing, the heat climbing her cheeks, but there was no point in pretending it hadn't happened.

Jake shook his head. "Just another temporary fix, darlin'. In a little while you're gonna feel the same urges you had a few minutes ago but ten times stronger. That's the way the heat is—it builds and builds until you hit the crisis point. I'm just hoping to get someone here to help you by that time."

Maddy wrapped her arms around her knees and shivered. "So you're going to call around and see if you can find some guy to come here and...and..." She shook her head and looked down, unable to finish.

Jake came back and sat beside her on the couch. "Look at me," he demanded, lifting her chin so their eyes met. "You think I want another male in my space? You think I want anyone but me touching you, Maddy?"

"I-I don't know," she whispered.

"Well I don't," he said roughly. "In fact this is just about killing me, sitting here when your scent is screaming at me to breed you. To take you and make you mine. But I *can't*." He blew out a breath and ran his hand through his hair. "I can't."

"I know, the taboo." Maddy bit her lip. "I'm sorry this is hard for you. I do appreciate what you're doing. I just...I don't like the idea of some strange guy coming here either."

"I know." Jake's eyes were bleak and winter blue again. "But you won't mind so much in a little while. Your body will take over, just like I told you. Just like it did before."

"I guess so," Maddy murmured but inside she wondered. Could she really warm to a stranger's touch the way she'd warmed to Jake's? Could she want another man's hands on her body when all she could think of was Jake touching her, kissing her, making her come?

He laughed dryly. "I can see you're not convinced. But believe me, it's true, darlin'. And we don't have much time—just have to hope a male of your tribe is in the area."

"Yeah, I'll cross my fingers." Maddy looked down at her lap. "Can't wait."

"You'll see, darlin'. This is for the best." Jake picked up one of her hands and kissed it gently, his lips barely brushing her knuckles. "Call me if you need me," he said, getting up again. "I'll be back in a minute. Take a tour of the cabin if you want—not that there's much to see."

"Thanks, maybe I will." Maddy nodded and wrapped the afghan more tightly around herself. What kind of male would Jake find to finish the job he'd started? And how could she open her body for a complete stranger when the only man she wanted was the one she couldn't have?

## Chapter Six

Maddy briefly considered putting her jeans and panties back on but what was the point? She was only going to take them off again soon so some stranger she'd never met before could fuck her. *No, don't think about it. There's no need to think about it until it happens, anyway.*

She tried to refasten her bra only to find that her nipples were now so sensitive there was no way she could stand the lace. Stripping it and her sweater off, she stood up and wrapped the afghan around her naked body toga-style. It was long enough to wind around her several times and soft enough that the material didn't irritate her nipples. Then, feeling slightly ridiculous, she went on a short tour of the cabin.

It was a very short tour because as Jake had said, there really wasn't much to see. She could hear him talking rapidly on the phone in the kitchen-dining room area so she didn't go there, not wanting to hear what he was saying. Instead she took the small dim hallway that led away from the living room area with the fireplace into the rest of the cabin.

There were only two doors to choose from so Maddy opened the one closest to her first. Inside was a complete surprise—a bathroom that looked like it had come straight out of *Better Homes and Gardens*. She stared in open-mouthed shock at the huge oval garden tub set in a warm wash of ivory and ivy green tile and surrounded with hanging plants. It was almost hot tub sized—easily big enough to hold three men Jake's size. To one side of the tub was a large bay window with double-glazed glass to keep in the heat and still show a gorgeous view of the mountains.

"Wow," she breathed, stepping closer to get a better look. This was the kind of bathroom she'd always dreamed of having. Long, hot bubble baths were the most sensual thing in her sexless life and the one pleasure she'd always allowed herself whenever things got rough. One of the things she hated the most about the crappy little apartment she was currently renting was its lack of a bathtub. There was no way a shower stall could take its place. A shower might get you clean but a bath soothed you, washed away your cares, let you relax no matter what else was going on in your life.

Wondering why a man living alone would have such a gorgeous bathroom, Maddy climbed the two steps that led up to the huge bathtub. Looking out the wide picture window, she noted that it was still snowing outside—and harder than ever from the look of things. *How in the world is anyone going to get through that to help me?* she thought uneasily. But Jake had promised to take care of her. Surely he wouldn't let her die or change into her animal self without help.

Pushing the disturbing thoughts away with an effort, she left the bathroom and its glorious tub and tried the door at the far end of the hallway. It opened onto a large but

cozy master bedroom that was decorated in dark blues and greens. The room was dominated by a king-size bed in a carved oak bed frame with thick posts at its corners. It was bachelor neat with no clothes in the corners or dirty dishes on the nightstands but the dark blue bedspread did have a rumpled look, as though Jake hadn't had time to make it right before he left.

"Nice," Maddy murmured to herself, going to stand at the foot of the bed. A lot nicer than her place, anyway—especially that bathroom. All it needed was a few feminine touches to make it perfect. Now if only she— A cramp doubled her over, cutting the thought off as effectively as a knife. A sharp, stabbing knife.

"Jake!" His name was a breathless cry that she could barely hear herself as it left her lips. Yet as she staggered and grabbed one of the thick, carved bedposts for support, he was suddenly there behind her, swooping her into his arms.

"It's all right, darlin'—I'm here," he murmured, kissing her gently on the cheek. "I'm here for you."

"Jake," she whispered weakly. "It hurts...hurts so much."

"I know, darlin'. And I'm gonna help you with that." He laid her tenderly on the bed and began to unwind the afghan. "I'm sorry—I thought what we did earlier would hold you longer than this or I never would have left you," he murmured.

"What...what are you doing?" Maddy asked, but made no move to stop him. The urge to be naked with him, to be skin-to-skin, was too strong and his large, warm hands on her bare skin felt too good to resist.

"Gotta take the edge off you again," Jake murmured. "There's someone in the area who might be able to help you—a good friend of mine named Will. But he's still miles away and with the snow going the way it is, I don't know when he'll make it here."

Maddy thought she understood. "So you're going to...going to make me come again while we wait for him?"

He nodded. "I'm sorry, darlin'. I'm afraid you won't make it if I don't. Can you spread your legs for me?"

To her shame, she was more than eager to comply. Opening herself to Jake seemed to get easier and easier and she reached for him eagerly as she spread her thighs. But to her surprise and dismay instead of lying on the bed beside her and cupping her sex in his hand, Jake knelt on the floor in front of the bed, positioning his mouth near her swollen pussy.

"What are you doing?" Maddy tried to shut her thighs but he wouldn't let her.

"Taking the edge off, like I told you, darlin'." He made it sound perfectly reasonable, as if he wasn't holding her legs open while she tried with all her might to close them.

"Okay, but please—not that way." Maddy tried to keep the distress out of her voice but didn't quite succeed. Of all the things Kevin had tried to get her worked up, this was the one she'd liked the least. Probably because he made such a big deal out of how

it was something he did for her when he didn't actually enjoy it himself at all. Looking down and seeing Jake kneeling between her knees, his broad shoulders spreading her thighs wide, was enough to bring back all those unhappy memories as well as the fear that she might be frigid and unresponsive to his actions. "Can't you just touch me again—like you did before?" she begged softly.

But Jake wasn't moving. "Sorry, darlin', but your body is stepping up the pace so you need a deeper orgasm to put off your heat. We have to try to get you through until Will gets here."

"But I can't...I don't like this. I don't respond to it." Maddy stumbled over the words, trying to explain herself, trying to make him understand.

"You don't, huh?" He raised an eyebrow at her and suddenly his eyes were a hooded dark gold. "Let me just try it, darlin'. If you can honestly tell me you don't like it after a few minutes I'll stop and try something else."

"No, please..." Maddy wasn't in the mood to compromise. "You don't understand. This won't work for me."

"We'll see, won't we?" Jake's face was suddenly stern. "Look, Maddy, I'm not gonna hurt you but I need you to believe me. You need a deeper orgasm than I can give you with my fingers. So lie back and let me eat your pussy like a good girl, okay?"

His words resounded in her head, bringing back her most recent encounter with The Dream and causing a shiver of desire to rush through her body. God, if only she knew he really wanted to do this it might not be so bad. But did he?

As if reading her mind Jake looked up, his golden eyes blazing. "God, darlin', you smell so good down here. Been wanting to taste you from the first minute I smelled your scent outside the hospital."

"Really? You...you like this? You really do?"

"Licking out a female in heat? Are you kidding me?" He made a low, lustful growling sound in the back of his throat. "Ask any shifter male and he'll tell you that besides fucking this is their number one fantasy. And that goes double for me."

Maddy wanted to believe him but it was hard after her bad experience with Kevin. "I didn't know men actually liked it. I-I thought it was just something they did out of...I don't know, a sense of duty. That's how my ex-fiancé seemed to look at it."

He gave her an incredulous look. "Duty? Look, darlin', I don't know who you've been with in the past that gave you that idea and I don't wanna know. All I can tell you is that I love it and I want to do it to you now." Holding her gaze firmly with his, he spoke in a low, rough voice. "I want to taste you, Maddy. Want to spread your sweet little pussy and lick you and suck you until you moan and cry and wrap your legs around my neck and beg for more. I want to taste your cunt honey and suck your clit. Want to put my tongue deep inside you and tongue-fuck your pussy until you come all over my face. Does that make it clear enough for you?"

Maddy wasn't sure if it was his hot, explicit language or the wave of painful needing that suddenly hit her but she found that she believed him. *Jake wants to do*

*this—he really does. And I need it*, she admitted to herself. *Need what he's offering me.* Instead of fighting him or trying to close her legs, she took a deep breath and tried to relax and open herself to the experience. It wouldn't be easy but she had to get over the bad memories of Kevin and concentrate on letting Jake give her body what it needed to survive. She still wasn't sure if she could get turned on by it—especially enough to come—but she sensed that she had a better shot at it with Jake than she had ever had with her ex.

"Easy, darlin'. That's a good girl," Jake murmured, stroking her inner thighs soothingly. "Such a good girl to spread your pussy for me and let me taste you." He leaned down and pressed a soft, chaste kiss to the apex of her mound where the thatch of well-trimmed golden red curls stopped and the slit of her sex began.

Maddy moaned softly, squeezing her eyes closed as his warm breath bathed her naked pussy. To her mingled shame and pleasure she could feel herself getting wet and slippery, her pussy lips swollen with need and desire, her clit throbbing for release as though he hadn't just made her come only minutes before with his fingers. *Well I guess that answers one question*, she told herself. Apparently if Jake was the one doing this, she was able to get turned on by it. More than turned on—she felt as if she were on fire from the waist down and he'd barely started.

"You're beautiful down here, darlin'." Jake's deep voice was ragged with desire. "So hot and wet and ready. I know you're sensitive so I'll try to go slow."

"Yes...please." Maddy put an arm over her eyes, hiding her face in the inner crook of her elbow. The shame and need were cresting inside her, making it hard to think past the swirling maelstrom of emotions inside her.

"Hey, darlin', don't do that." Gently but firmly Jake pried her arm away. "Watch me," he said, his voice soft but demanding as he grasped her chin gently in one hand. "Watch me eat your sweet little pussy. I want you to know how much I enjoy this—how incredibly good you taste and feel in my mouth."

As before, Maddy found it was impossible to disobey him. Mute with apprehension and need, she propped herself up on her elbows and watched as he lowered himself back down between her thighs and bent down to kiss her again.

This time he spread her wide with his thumbs, baring her dark pink inner folds and revealing the delicate pearl of her clit before he began. Then he sat there for what was probably only seconds but felt like hours to Maddy, just looking at her and breathing her in. At last when she could stand it no more and was about to ask him to either stop or get it over with, he moved.

"Beautiful," he breathed and then pressed forward to open her with his tongue.

Maddy moaned breathlessly as she watched him lick her. He started at the bottom of her slit and dragged upward, his tongue flattened out as though he was licking an all-day lollipop in his favorite flavor. And to judge from the look on his face it very well might be.



"God, you taste so good, Maddy. So salty and sweet and goddamn perfect," he growled. "I could eat your pussy all night and never get tired of it."

She would have answered but she was too busy moaning. This was what she needed, what her body desired—his wet heat against her own. It had never been like this with Kevin—never. As Jake licked her again, she found herself reaching for his head and threading her fingers through his wild black hair. Had she really been afraid that she wouldn't be able to react to him? Her body was going crazy—tingling everywhere, getting high on the pleasure he was giving her.

"That's right, baby," he murmured, looking up at her briefly. "Let it go for me. Just relax and enjoy yourself."

Maddy didn't see how she could do anything else. Every time Kevin had done this to her it was like going to the dentist—lying back and letting someone do something that was very unpleasant to a sensitive part of your anatomy. With Jake it was completely different. She felt herself flow to him as naturally as water running downhill. Her legs opened and her pussy got wet and hot in a way it never had before despite Kevin's elaborate techniques. Jake wasn't even doing anything fancy. He was just licking and sucking, stroking her aching clit carefully with the tip of his tongue as she writhed under him and pulled his hair.

If the hair pulling bothered him he didn't show it. In fact, the tighter Maddy's grip in his hair and the more she bucked her hips up to meet his tongue, the more he seemed to like it. She could feel his deep growl of approval as she ground herself against him shamelessly, giving in to the brand new urges her body was experiencing, opening herself to him completely.

Then he pressed even deeper and she felt his tongue thrust into her hungrily. *Inside me, God, he's actually licking inside me. Tongue-fucking me like he said he would!* The thought made her even hotter somehow and she gasped and pressed forward, opening herself as much as she could, wanting him to get as deep as he could go inside her.

*God, oh God, good...so good!* The sensation of his tongue delving into her was intense and almost overwhelming but at the same time Maddy knew she needed something more—something thicker and harder and she needed it deeper than he could reach with his tongue. She tried to push the realization away and concentrate on the pleasure that was building to a shattering peak. Jake had told her he couldn't do that for her—had even gone to the trouble of calling a friend to come and do it instead. So there was no sense in wishing for what she knew she couldn't have.

Then he was licking her clit again, sucking it into his mouth and caressing it with the tip of his talented tongue until all coherent thought left her. At the same time she felt him slide two long fingers into her pussy, pressing upward and inward to fill her until she moaned and gasped against him.

The combination was too much for her body to take. With a sharp cry she felt herself tilting over the edge of orgasm for only the second time in her life, giving in to

the incredible sensations he was causing, letting herself go as she had never been able to before.

"That's right, darlin'. Come for me—let yourself come." Jake's voice was rough with need as he lapped between her legs, making sure to get every last trace of her honey as he rode out her orgasm. Maddy could feel herself quivering around his fingers, trembling against his tongue, but he never stopped pleasuring her until she shuddered to an exhausted stop and lay limp and panting on the bed.

"God, that was...amazing." She was having a hard time catching her breath—feeling like she'd just run a mile.

"Glad to be of service, darlin'." Jake finally came up from between her legs, a smoldering look in his pure gold eyes, his sensuous lips wet with her juices. "Didn't I tell you you'd come harder that way?"

Maddy felt a hot blush climbing her cheeks but she had to nod her agreement. "It was more...intense," she admitted.

He nodded with satisfaction and then his expression turned suddenly grim. "Good. Hopefully it'll hold you until Will gets here."

The reminder that someone else would finish the job Jake had started made Maddy want to cover herself. She sat up and reached for the afghan. "Who is he, anyway? You said he was a friend of yours but how do you know him?"

Jake sat on the bed beside her and put an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close. "He's probably about my best and oldest friend. He's a half-breed like me which means he should have had to fight his way into the Lynx tribe the way I fought my way into the Wolf tribe. Only the sly sonuvabitch found a way around it. He studied his people's laws until he found the old rule that had only been used once about a hundred years ago—something about if a half-breed's father is related to the chief of the tribe on his mother's side his son can be admitted without a fight." Jake laughed, his eyes far away and deep in memory. "The elders didn't like it but they couldn't do anything about it either. Will walked right into the tribe without getting a scratch on him."

Maddy looked at him curiously. "Is that how you got those scars on your arms?" she asked, hoping the question wouldn't offend him.

Jake looked down at himself reflexively, as though the scars were so much a part of him he didn't even notice them anymore. "Uh-huh—all over me, actually. I had to let myself get bitten by every damn member of the pack while they were in wolf form and I was human. It was their bites that activated the latent wolf genes and allowed me to turn for the first time." He looked thoughtful. "For Lynxes it's different—either a half-breed Lynx can change, in which case he can be accepted into the tribe—or he can't. Will was lucky he was able to change since he wanted into the tribe so damn badly."

"Did you want in too? Is that why you went through it?"

He nodded. "I was young and it was a matter of pride. I thought since I didn't fit in the human world, the pack was where I belonged." His face darkened. "I found out the hard way that wasn't exactly the truth. I've been a lone wolf, living outside the tribe

and not running with the pack, for going on six years now and that works better for me in the long run."

"So you left your pack? Why?" She hoped he wouldn't mind her curiosity but she wanted to know everything she could about this fascinating man.

Jake cleared his throat. "It's a long story but I'll try to give you the short version. The head of the pack—the alpha Wolf—is my half brother on my other side. We share the same dad the way Beth and I share the same mom. Anyway, we've never really gotten along but since he rules the roost over there, I kind of had to swallow my pride and try to make things work with him."

"So you left because you finally got sick of him?" Maddy could see how that could happen. As gentle as Jake had been with her, he was obviously a strong-willed guy—not someone to give ground where his pride was concerned.

But Jake was shaking his head. "Not exactly. See I had a girl I really cared about—Alissa—but females are always scarce in shifter tribes and the wolf tribe was going through a hard time—there was a two-to-one male-to-female ratio, more or less. So when we went for permission to mate, my half-brother wouldn't let us. Instead he declared fight or share."

"Fight or share? What is that—some kind of tradition or ceremony for shifters?"

Jake nodded. "In a way. It's not used very often—just when the tribe is experiencing a flux in its female numbers. Basically it means the female has to either take two mates or two males have to battle it out for her. One way or the other it takes care of the problem."

"How?" Maddy asked.

Jake looked grim. "Because if the female takes two mates then two males are satisfied and nobody goes wanting. But if the males fight to the death then there's one less male to satisfy and everyone still goes home happy." It was clear from the bitter tone of his voice that he was being sarcastic. Maddy was almost afraid to ask him anymore even though she was dying to know the end of the story. She waited for a moment and finally made a soft enquiring noise.

Jake looked up. "Sorry, darlin'. I was thinking." He sighed. "Anyway, Alissa was a sweet girl—didn't want anyone hurt. She picked another male for me to share her with. Not because she loved him more—I understand that now. But he was her best friend—a guy she'd grown up with since they were kids and she thought it would be easier that way." He shook his head. "But I was too proud—didn't want to share. So we fought."

"You killed him?" Maddy guessed.

He nodded, a look of anguish passing briefly over his face. "I did. I swear I'd do anything in my power to take it back if I could but it's too late. Over and done with. And when I looked up from the blood and dust, from his broken body lying there at my feet and saw Alissa's eyes..." He cleared his throat and looked away but Maddy was sure she'd seen tears in his pale blue eyes before he did.

"She didn't want to...to mate you after that?" Maddy asked softly.

"She killed herself. Couldn't live with the guilt of her best friend and her lover fighting over her. And then of her lover killing her best friend." He ran a hand through his hair. "That's when I declared lone-wolf status and moved out here. I couldn't stand to be where everything reminded me of her. I did learn one thing though—if anything like that ever happens again I'll share. I'd rather see the woman I love safe in the arms of another male than see her hurt or dead."

"Oh Jake, I'm so sorry..." She put a hand on his arm and Jake covered it briefly with his own.

"It's okay, darlin'. Water under the bridge now. But I'm a wiser wolf than I used to be and I'm better off on my own."

She kissed his cheek. "You didn't have to tell me that, you know."

"I know. But I thought you should understand that not all my scars are from my initiation into the tribe."

*Scars...all those scars...* Maddy had a sudden thought—a flash of the boy he'd brought into the ER the night before. "Jake, that kid—the boy you brought in last night with bites all over him—was he trying to get initiated into the Wolf tribe too?"

Jake scowled. "He's my nephew—Beth's son by a Wolf shifter. I couldn't give you any information about him last night because if anyone in the pack found out he'd sought out human help after his initiation they'd hunt him down and kill him. No name, no date of birth—nothing. As long as he's a John Doe he should be safe. But the minute they catch wind he's in a human hospital—"

Maddy raised a hand to stop him. "I would never say anything, I hope you know that."

He blew out a breath and ran a hand through his hair. "I know, I'm sorry. It's just...I wasn't sure he was going to make it. The bites don't always activate the shifter genes—sometimes they just kill. Todd—my nephew—crawled all the way to my cabin but he was too weak to do more than scratch on the door. I opened the door and found him bleeding out on the ground, looking as white as the damn snow, and I knew I had to do something. It would kill Beth if anything happens to him—Todd's dad was killed in a territory dispute ten years ago and he's all she has left."

"So you picked him up and brought him in to us," Maddy murmured, remembering the anguished look in Jake's pale blue eyes when he'd laid the boy gently on the stretcher. "No wonder you were so upset when I ran after you."

Jake shook his head. "I was just worried about the kid. But I think I heard you telling Beth that he was in stable condition before you left?"

Maddy nodded. "They were still working on him when I punched out but he didn't get airlifted to UVA, which is a very good sign." She sighed and shifted on the bed. "In fact, if you want, I can make that call I promised Beth I would make and check on his condition."

He frowned at her. "You sure you feel up for it?"

"Sure. I feel much better now." And she wanted to do something—anything to keep her mind off the coming arrival of his friend Will. No matter what a good guy Jake seemed to think he was, he still wasn't the one she wanted to help her through her heat.

Jake got her his house phone since her cell was still in her coat in the truck. Maddy dialed the number from memory and waited impatiently, tapping her fingernails on the phone's plastic casing. But she didn't have to be impatient for long. She'd dialed the back line that rang right through and before she knew it Peggy, the nurse supervisor she'd been working with the night before, was answering the phone. It only took a few moments of friendly chat to casually bring up the young John Doe and then Peggy was a fountain of information.

"Yes, poor thing, he's hanging in there but he's still really out of it," she said, warming to Maddy's interest. "I think it would help if he had some family to visit him but unfortunately we don't know who to contact. I actually wanted to call and ask you about that—you couldn't get *any* information from the man who brought him in last night?"

"Nope, nothing," Maddy said, feeling slightly guilty for lying. "He wasn't, uh, very receptive to being questioned." She cast a quick glance at Jake who raised an eyebrow at her. "So they think he's going to make it?"

"Yes—as hard as it seems to believe. The poor kid was used as a chew toy by a whole wolf pack according to the expert they brought in—bites from at least twenty different animals. But somehow he's still breathing. Now if he can make it through the rabies shots that will be another story." Peggy sounded grim.

"Oh poor kid!" Maddy felt genuinely sorry for him. A rabies series was never fun and he probably didn't even need it since he'd been bitten by werewolves, not real wolves. Unfortunately she didn't see how she could get him out of it without sounding crazy so she had to let the matter drop. "Well, thanks for the information, Peggy. I'd better get off the phone."

"Why, you have somewhere to be? Getting back together with the good doctor Kevin?" Peggy's voice was mildly hopeful. She'd always considered Kevin a great catch for Maddy and was sorry when they broke up.

Maddy made a face even though she knew the senior nurse couldn't see it. "Not in a million years, Peggy—sorry. I'm just visiting friends and someone else has to use the phone, that's all."

"Oh? Well I'm glad you're not all by yourself. You know, if you and Kevin still aren't back together at Christmas you're welcome to come celebrate with me and my family. I wanted to ask you to Thanksgiving but you'd already volunteered to work."

Maddy found herself unexpectedly touched. "Thanks, Peggy—that's really sweet of you. I'll let you know." She hung up after a few more pleasantries and turned to Jake. "Well, you heard—he's going to make it. I'm sorry I couldn't get him out of the rabies shots but I didn't know what to say."

"That's okay. After getting bitten by the entire pack I don't think a few shots is going to kill him." There was a definite look of relief on Jake's face. "I think I'll call Beth and tell her right now—unless you wanted to tell her?" He raised an eyebrow and nodded at the phone questioningly.

"No, you go ahead—I'm fine. Just going to go visit your bathroom for a minute. Um—will I be okay to be away from you for a little while?" She was in no hurry to experience any more of the stabbing cramps, especially as they seemed to get worse every time she had them.

Jake nodded. "Unless you're a lot further gone than I thought you should be good for a while."

"Okay, thanks." Maddy stood, taking the afghan with her. "That's some bathtub, by the way. I was really jealous when I saw it. Did you, uh, used to have a girlfriend who wanted it that way?" She felt stupid angling for personal information like this but the thought that a man alone wouldn't need or want the huge, elaborate tub he had in his bathroom just wouldn't leave her alone.

Jake chuckled. "There's no woman in my life besides Beth, darlin', and there hasn't been in a long time. Too long." He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "But having a big deep tub you can really wallow around in is a necessity when you're a shifter."

Maddy frowned. "It is? Why?"

"You'll see after your first change," he said mysteriously. "But believe me, it's a must-have item when you get furry once a month."

"Okay, well...I'll just go admire it some more." Maddy shrugged. "You call Beth and tell her everything's okay with her son. I know she must be waiting to hear."

He nodded. "Oh yeah, Todd's everything to her. Thanks again for finding out."

"It's the least I can do after everything you've done for me." Maddy felt a lump in her throat and swallowed it with difficulty.

"Hey, darlin', it's my pleasure. I just wish...just wish I could do more for you." Jake's deep voice was low and rough, as though he was in pain. Maddy could relate because she was feeling the same thing. Suddenly she knew if she stayed and looked into his golden eyes one more minute she was going to lose it. And the last thing Jake needed was a hormonal female crying all over him.

With a small trembling smile she nodded and left the bedroom as quickly as the trailing afghan would allow.

Going into the bathroom, she shut the door behind her and gave in to the tears that wanted to flow. They stung her eyes and wet her cheeks but she tried to cry quietly, not wanting to upset the man in the other room.

*It's not fair...it's just not fair!* She really liked Jake—a lot—probably too much. But it wasn't just the way he made her body feel, although that was pretty damn spectacular. It was the way he cared for the people in his life, the way he seemed to want to take care of the ones he loved. Finding a man like that was rare these days. And finding one

who wasn't married or involved or gay and who was actually interested in you was even more rare. But there was no way they could have anything long term. In fact, as soon as his friend Will made an appearance, Jake was going to have to bow out entirely.

*I don't want to lose him*, Maddy thought, knowing she had lost him already. She cried a little longer over the unfairness of it all before she could get control of herself but finally the tears dried up. There was no changing the situation so she might as well make the most of it. Sighing, she blotted her eyes with some toilet tissue. Maybe she could take a bath in the huge tub—Jake had said she should be all right without him for a while and it would be nice to feel fresh and clean before...*before I have to meet his friend*. Maddy wouldn't let herself think further than that.

She was going to start the water running but first she walked to the rectangular bathroom mirror positioned above the sink. "Get hold of yourself, girl," she told her reflection sternly, staring at the disheveled redhead in the glass. "This is hard enough as it is without you losing it and—"

Maddy stopped abruptly, cut off by the sight of her own face in the mirror. *My eyes – what's wrong with my eyes?* She leaned forward, bringing her face inches from the mirror to study herself. Her eyes, which had been a warm, melted chocolate brown her entire life, had changed. They were now a pale, luminous green with oval slits for pupils.

Cat's eyes.

## Chapter Seven

"Jake? Can you come in here a minute?" Maddy's voice was shaking but there didn't seem to be anything she could do about it. She felt...wrong. Wrong all over somehow, as though her entire body was rebelling against her. *This must be what it feels like when you have a heart attack or a stroke*, she thought dizzily, gripping the cold porcelain sides of the sink for support. *Something inside you stops working or starts working the wrong way and all of a sudden your whole life is upside down.*

"Maddy? What is it?" There was concern in Jake's voice and he still held the phone in his hand as he came into the bathroom. "I just got a call from Will—he's snowed in where he's at but he might be able to—" He stopped talking abruptly when Maddy turned to face him.

"My eyes," she said simply. "They're different—wrong."

"God, darlin'." He grabbed her by the shoulders and leaned down, studying her new green cat's eyes anxiously. "How long have they been like this?"

"I don't know. I just now noticed them and—" A feeling of need-lust-pain-desire swept through her so suddenly and strongly that her legs folded under her. She would have fallen to the cold tile floor if Jake hadn't held her up. Panicked, she reached up to grab his arms for further support but the sight of her hands stopped her.

They were no longer strictly hands. Her fingers were bunching together as Jake's had earlier when he showed her his hand-to-paw-and-back-again trick and there was coarse, reddish-gold fur sprouting between her knuckles. At the tip of each digit, where her fingernails should have been, were inch-long claws that looked sharp enough to slice through anything.

"My hands—what's wrong with me?" Maddy stared at them in horror.

Jake's face was grim. "You're changing. You've reached the crisis point—from here on out it's breed or change And since this is your first heat, you need to be bred. Later when you're more established as a shifter the change won't be as dangerous to you but right now it could be lethal."

"It hurts!" Maddy gasped as the strange feeling inside her grew. She felt numb and tingly all over and her hands as if someone were doing orthopedic surgery on her fingers without any anesthetic.

But though the pain in her extremities was bad, it was nothing compared to the waves of desire and need that were still sweeping through her. Her nipples were tight and hot and her sex was suddenly so swollen and wet she could feel her juices coating her inner thighs. It was as though her body needed two different things but couldn't decide which it needed more.



"Don't worry, darlin', we're gonna get you through this." Jake pulled her close and she clung to him with a panicky tightness born of sheer desperation.

"How?" she asked and was her voice sounding funny now too? Kind of raspy, like a big cat purring? "How," she asked again. "When your friend isn't here to...to breed me?"

"I'll have to do it myself." Jake's expression was so dark Maddy would have been afraid of him if she hadn't been so scared for herself.

"But you said...what about the taboo?" she gasped, still pressing herself against him.

"Fuck the damn tribal taboo," he said roughly. "If you don't get bred you could die and I'm not gonna let that happen to you, darlin'. I promised I'd take care of you and I will." Leaning down, he swung her up into his arms and carried her back to the bedroom.

Maddy curled in toward his chest, seeking comfort in his warmth, looking for relief in his spicy, masculine scent, but none of it seemed to help this time. The pulling, drawing sensation of need was centered between her legs now, her pussy wet and hot and her clit throbbing in time to her heartbeat. A hunger was growing inside her, a need to be filled, to be taken. And not gently either—she needed to be *fucked*. Fucked hard and long and deep and then filled with his cum.

The idea of unprotected sex didn't bother her anymore—in fact, she welcomed it. Something feral inside her sensed that she needed skin-to-skin contact to make this work. She had to have Jake's bare cock inside her naked, open pussy, had to feel him thrusting in and out of her and coming inside her in order to find relief. There was no other way.

"Please!" she moaned as he set her gently down on the bed. "Please, Jake, it hurts!"

"I know, darlin', but I'm gonna make it better," he promised, his deep voice rough with worry. "Here—get rid of that damn blanket and get up on your hands and knees."

Maddy fought her way free of the afghan with his help and then somehow managed to obey his instructions to get on her hands and knees—her knees, anyway. She was trembling and weak—too weak to raise her upper body without collapsing on the bed. So she wound up with her head cradled in her arms and her bottom in the air with her legs spread wide. She couldn't help crying softly as the waves of need swept through her ruthlessly.

"Okay, darlin'. It's all right. It's gonna be all right." Jake stroked her trembling back and thighs with his big, warm hands, gentling her as though she were a spooked horse. Then she heard the jingle of his belt buckle and the low purring sound of his zipper coming down as he stripped. Suddenly there was something hot and hard brushing against her inner thighs. Something she needed desperately inside her.

"I'm sorry, Maddy, but you're too far gone to take things easy." His voice was low and strained, as though he was fighting to control himself. "This first time is gonna be quick and dirty."

"I don't care!" she moaned, pressing back against him, her hips moving of their own accord. "I don't want you to be gentle—just do it, Jake. Just *fuck* me!"

Her desperate, breathless plea seemed to set something off inside him, to free a part of himself he'd been keeping caged from the moment he first saw her and knew what she was and what she would become. Maddy heard a low snarl and then the hot, blunt head of his cock was nudging its way between her legs, finding the entrance to her pussy.

"Get ready, darlin'. Here I come," he growled and then in one long, hard thrust he was deep inside her, his cock buried to the hilt in her wet cunt.

Maddy felt a deep, stretching pleasure-pain as he opened her and she wanted to sob with relief. Finally, *finally*, the urgent hunger-craving-lust-need was being fulfilled. He felt right inside her, so unutterably right she couldn't speak, couldn't move, couldn't think. All she could do was give in to the instinct that said she had to open herself, spread her thighs wide and accept his cock deep inside her pussy.

"That's right, Maddy. Good girl." Jake's deep voice was a low, possessive growl and she could feel him gripping her hips, his long fingers spanning her pelvis easily. "Just spread yourself open and let me fuck you, let me fuck that sweet little cunt until I fill you up with my cum."

Maddy moaned in agreement and grasped his dark blue bedspread, tearing the fabric with the new razor-sharp claws that had sprouted at the tips of her fingers. But she was no longer noticing her hands now. All her attention was focused on what was going on between her legs.

Jake was huge inside her—bigger than anyone or anything she'd ever had before—he filled her to the limit and beyond, the head of his cock nudging the end of her channel hard and insistently. But that was okay—good, right, perfect as far as Maddy was concerned. She needed to be this filled, needed to be opened completely, to be bred and somehow her body recognized that fact and welcomed it.

"Jake," she moaned breathlessly as he held still inside her, letting her get used to his thickness and heat. "Jake, please—I need you *now*."

His answer was to pull almost all the way out of her and then thrust home again, getting as deeply into her pussy as he could. And then he did it again...and again...and again. There was nothing soft or gentle in his motions—he was battering her, taking her as hard and as deep as he could, filling her cunt with rough, brutal motions that should have hurt. And it *did* hurt, Maddy found. But in a good kind of way. A pleasurable, stretching pain that she never wanted to end.

She cried out and pressed back against him, meeting his rhythm with one of her own. *God, so good...so right! More...more!* It was as though he was sating a hunger that had been growing all her life without her knowing it. She hung her head and moaned as he fucked her, giving him everything, spreading her thighs as wide as she could to get him deep inside her.

Someone was gasping and begging and saying Jake's name over and over like a mantra or a prayer. After a while Maddy realized it was her but she couldn't seem to stop herself. It was as Jake has promised it would be. She had no shame left, no embarrassment or modesty. There was only the intense desire to be filled, to be opened and bred. Only the need to feel him moving inside her, filling her with his cock until they both came. She could feel the pleasure building once more but this time she knew she needed something special to make it over the crest—something only Jake could give her.

"God, darlin'...can't hold out any longer. So hot...so tight..." Jake growled, his deep voice almost unrecognizable with lust.

"Don't stop," Maddy begged him, pressing back to take even more of his thick shaft into her naked pussy. "Don't stop, Jake. Fill me up—come in me. *Please.*"

With a low roar he did exactly as she asked. Pulling almost all the way out of her, he thrust in again, pressing the head of his cock to the end of her channel and getting as deep inside her as he could before he started pulsing, filling her with spurt after spurt of his seed.

Maddy had never felt a man coming inside her pussy, had never actually been able to discern the exact moment when he was filling her with his essence. But there was no mistaking the wet heat and the way his thick shaft got even thicker with each spurt, stretching her cunt even wider as he bathed her womb with his cum.

Only then, only when she felt his cum filling her, was she able to let go and crest over the edge of orgasm herself. It was the third orgasm of her life and it was completely shattering. Maddy felt as if she were flying apart in all directions, her one anchor the place where they were joined, as Jake filled her. It felt good and right and perfect—like coming home. Not just a physical pleasure but an emotional one too, one that brought tears to her eyes even as wave after wave of pleasure battered her until everything began to look gray and blurry around the edges.

"God," Maddy whispered brokenly. She started to collapse on the bed but Jake was there, holding her up, keeping her safe. Though he had been standing behind her on the floor the entire time he somehow managed to get on the bed behind her without sliding out of her. He pulled her onto her side, his arms wrapped around her waist and his legs bracketing hers protectively. To her surprise, Maddy could tell that he was as hard as ever, as though he hadn't even come, though she could feel his hot seed coating her inner thighs.

Rather than being disconcerted, she took comfort in the feeling of his hard, thick length still buried to the hilt inside her. It felt right to still be joined to him. Safe. Good. Right. She sighed and snuggled back against him, loving the feel of his arms around her even as his cock continued to fill her pussy.

"Are you okay, darlin'?" Jake's deep voice was filled with worry as he held her close. "Was I too rough on you?"

"You *were* rough but that's okay. I think that's what I needed." Maddy sighed and pressed back against him. "I'm so glad it was you, Jake. I wanted it to be you from the start."

"I know, darlin'. I wanted it too." He stroked a strand of her hair away from the side of her face and kissed her ear gently. "As good a friend as Will is, I didn't want to give you over to him. Not before—" he stopped abruptly. "Anyway, I wanted it to be me."

"I'm glad you feel that way." Maddy knew she ought to ask about the consequences of their actions but just then she was feeling too warm and sleepy and satiated to think about it. She didn't even know the other shifters—what did she care about what they thought of her actions? It was much more pleasant to concentrate on Jake and the way they were still joined than to think of anything negative. Speaking of which... "Um, are we going to be like this awhile?" she asked, moving her hips tentatively to indicate his shaft, which was still deep inside her. "Not that I mind at all, I just wondered," she hastened to add.

Jake growled softly as her hesitant move stimulated him. "I'm afraid we'll be locked together for another fifteen minutes at least, darlin'. See, a male wolf shifter has a...I guess you could call it a knot at the base of his cock that swells when he comes inside a female. It helps keep his seed inside her and increases the chance of another breeding right away."

"Mmm." Maddy shifted provocatively against him again. "I don't mind. Do all male shifters have a knot?"

Jake kissed the side of her neck and slid his hands from her waist up to cup her full breasts. "No, Lynxes have a kind of barb at the base of their cocks—serves the same purpose though. I don't know what the Bear tribe has and I don't wanna know—they're all the way out in the Rockies, anyway. Too far away to bother with."

"A barb?" Maddy shivered, thinking what a close escape she'd had. "That sounds *really* uncomfortable. Painful, even."

Behind her, Jake shrugged. "Maybe. From what I understand, though, it's a *good* kind of pain." He twisted her nipples gently, as if for emphasis and Maddy had to bite back a moan.

"A good pain like...like you breeding me so hard just now?" she asked breathlessly, finding that the word came easily to her now.

"Mmm-hmm." He was licking her neck now, tasting her skin hot and slow, just as he had tasted her pussy earlier. His fingers continued to play with her nipples until she felt as if she were on fire. "Had to take you hard to let your body know which way to go," he explained, his breath hot in her ear. "If I hadn't fucked your sweet little pussy as hard and as deep as I could, you might have continued to change. Later on that will be okay but it's dangerous during your first heat."

With a start, Maddy realized she'd forgotten all about the strange feeling in her body earlier. Fearing the worst, she put up a hand in front of her eyes. But the razor-

sharp claws and golden-red fur were gone and her fingers looked fine, as though nothing had ever happened to them. She sighed with relief at the sight. She was back to normal again—or as normal as her life could be ever since this roller-coaster ride with Jake had started the night before in the ER.

"I can't believe I just met you last night," she murmured, pressing back into his embrace. "It seems like we've known each other forever."

"I feel the same way." Jake was moving inside her now, but gently this time. A slow, sensual rhythm that almost felt like dancing as he stroked into her with short, slow thrusts.

Maddy moaned softly and moved to join the dance. She wasn't sure if she could come again so soon, but it felt wonderful just having him inside her, filling her, owning her body and soul and heart the way no one ever had before. Still, as good as it felt, she wanted to keep talking, wanted to know more about the man who had fucked her so brutally minutes before and was making slow, gentle love to her now.

"I just realized something," she murmured as she ground herself against him. "You know I'm a nurse but I don't know hardly anything about you. What do you do?"

Jake kissed her ear. "I'm a carpenter. Kind of a carpenter slash contractor, actually. I like to work with my hands." He pinched her nipples, sending sparks of pleasure through her entire body, and Maddy moaned. "I built this cabin," he added, kissing the side of her neck again. "Designed it, cut the wood for it and built it from the ground up."

"It's...beautiful." Maddy was getting beyond coherent thought as the pleasure built inside her again, fueled by his slow, languid strokes. "God, Jake, how can you make me want you again so soon?" she gasped, giving up all pretense of talking about anything other than what was happening below their waists.

"You're in heat, darlin'. Your body needs to be bred often and well." He thrust a little harder to make his point. "You need to be filled with my cum in every conceivable position. Not that I mind."

"I don't mind either," Maddy whispered breathlessly. "God, Jake, fuck me again. That feels so good!"

"I know, darlin'. To me too," he murmured, thrusting again. "Just be a good girl and open your pussy for me and I promise to fuck you as long and as deep as you need me to."

Maddy couldn't answer him because the pleasure was washing over her again. A little more gently this time but no less intense. This was what everything had been leading up to, she realized. The cramps, her loneliness and longing, even The Dream that had plagued her for so long. Somehow she thought she wouldn't have it anymore—there was no need for it now that she'd found what her body craved. *Jake. He's everything I need. Everything I want.*

*But can I keep him?*

She pushed the negative thought away and concentrated on the orgasm that swelled through her as he filled her with his cum again. This was all she wanted to think about right now—all she wanted to feel. Just Jake, inside her, surrounding her, protecting and fulfilling her. Worshiping her body with his own, just as he had promised.

Maddy never wanted it to end.

\* \* \* \* \*

It didn't end for a long, long time. Every time she thought she'd gotten enough, Maddy felt the desire growing inside her once more and every time Jake was there to give her exactly what she needed. It amazed her that he didn't seem to require any recovery time at all between bouts but he explained that it had to do with the female pheromones she was emitting.

"As long as you need me I'll be able to stay hard," he murmured, thrusting up into her as she straddled his narrow hips and ground herself against him. It was a sexual position Maddy had never much enjoyed before—not that she'd liked any of them with Kevin—but being on top made her feel extremely vulnerable and exposed. However, she was learning to enjoy a great many things she hadn't thought possible before. She rode Jake like an experienced cowgirl breaking a stallion—with confidence and pleasure—until she felt him spurt inside her again and her own orgasm followed.

They had been making love for hours—breeding, Maddy supposed—and she thought they probably would have gone on until daybreak if something strange hadn't happened to interrupt them. When she thought about it later, she realized that it was more startling than strange but at the time she had no time to think—only react.

When it happened Jake was sitting on the end of the bed, facing the mirror that was hung over the large solid oak dresser that matched the king-size bed frame. He had Maddy on his lap with her back to his front and his cock was buried deeply inside her.

"Watch me fuck you, darlin'," he murmured in her ear as he slid slowly in and out of her open pussy. "Watch me stretch your tight little cunt with my cock. Soon I'm going to come inside you again. Is that what you want?"

"Yes, Jake. Please, *yes*," Maddy moaned softly. The sight of him fucking her, of his long, thick cock sliding in and out of her open pussy in the mirror before her, was possibly the most erotic thing she'd seen in her entire life. As he pumped inside her, Jake was fondling her breasts, pinching and stroking her nipples until she thought she would die of pleasure. Giving herself up to the warm sensation of another orgasm growing inside her, she lay her head back against his broad shoulder and just let herself feel.

She had never been so open, so naked, or so vulnerable, which was why it was a shock to hear a deep male voice in front of her say, "Well, damn, it looks like I missed the party."

## Chapter Eight

Maddy's eyes flew open, her senses suddenly on red alert, to see a tall, broad-shouldered man with golden brown hair and dark emerald green eyes staring at her intently. He was bare chested and there was snow melting on his hair and jeans as though he'd just come in from outside. The gaze he was directing at her was so intense it was frightening.

"Oh my God!" she gasped, instinctively trying to cover herself. "Who—?"

"William Tanner at your service." The tall man made a mocking half-bow. "Although it looks like you're being serviced just fine without me," he added with a grin.

Maddy began to struggle to get up, to get away from Jake and go hide, but his huge scarred arms clamped around her like flexible iron bands and wouldn't let her go. "Relax, darlin'," he murmured in her ear. "Can't stop in the middle—it's bad for your breeding cycle. Besides, this is just Will—the friend I was telling you about."

"But he...he's...we're..." She couldn't get the words out of her mouth—couldn't express how horribly embarrassed she was at that moment. The tall man with the dark emerald green eyes was just standing there watching as though it was perfectly normal to walk in on two people making love. Even worse, Jake was continuing to thrust inside her pussy, going deeper and deeper with each stroke as though it wasn't in any way unusual to continue making love to her with his friend watching.

Jake seemed to understand her anxiety, despite her sudden inability to talk. "Turn around, will you?" he growled at the tall man. "Maddy here isn't used to shifter ways and you're embarrassing the hell out of her."

"Really?" Will raised one eyebrow in surprise and then shrugged. "Suit yourself. I just didn't want to offend you."

Maddy finally found her voice. "Offend us? By *not* watching something that should be *private*?"

Behind her Jake sighed and pulled her closer. "That's the thing, Maddy—in shifter communities we don't hide natural things like breeding. And not to watch when a couple is having sex right in front of you is considered rude. So believe it or not Will here is *trying* to be polite."

"Not that I mind watching. In this case being polite is damn easy." Will gave her a last appreciative glance before turning slowly and deliberately away.

Maddy had been hoping he would leave completely but to her dismay he just stood there, feet slightly apart and hands clasped behind his back, staring out through the open bedroom door as Jake continued to thrust inside her.

"Jake, *please*," she whispered but her plea didn't do any good.

"Need to finish, Maddy," he murmured in her ear. "Need to come inside you at least one more time to make sure you're over the worst of your heat. Just relax and let me make you come, darlin'. Then as soon as my knot goes down I'll let you go, I promise."

"I don't...don't know if I can. Not with him standing there listening," Maddy whispered back. But even as she protested she could feel the pleasure building inside her again.

"Sure you can, darlin'." Jake let one large hand slide down from her breasts to the place where they were joined. "Here, I'll help you. Watch in the mirror while I pet your pussy."

Maddy moaned but couldn't help watching as his long fingers parted her swollen pink lips and began to stroke her sensitive clit. And all the while Jake continued to thrust into her and murmur in her ear. He told her how beautiful she was, opening herself for him, how hot it made him to watch his cock glide in and out of her open pussy, and how much he loved the feel of her tight wetness all around him. It went on and on until she felt as if she were drowning in the sensual overload of his cock in her pussy, his fingers on her clit and his voice in her ear.

Soon, despite the strange man standing not three feet away from her, Maddy felt her orgasm coming as inexorably as the tide. It seemed that no matter how embarrassing the circumstances, her body would allow nothing to come between her and being bred. The realization seemed both terrible and somehow inevitable—as though it were something she had always known about herself but never acknowledged before. Which was crazy, since she'd never even been able to have an orgasm before that night. But still, that was how it felt.

"That's right, darlin'. Good girl," she heard Jake whisper in her ear. "Just ride me, Maddy. Spread your legs and ride my cock until you come for me. Wanna feel you coming all around me so I can fill you up."

The dirty words as well as everything he was doing to her body was suddenly too much. With a low gasp, Maddy felt herself coming again. She didn't know how many orgasms this made—she'd lost count hours ago. All she knew was that she craved the delicious wave of pleasure that rolled over her and the hot spurt of cum deep in her pussy when Jake followed her orgasm with his own.

She didn't know why she did it but at the last moment she raised her eyes from where they were joined and looked up, higher in the mirror that faced the bed. To her dismay she found herself staring into the dark emerald green eyes of Jake's best friend.

Though his gaze was supposed to be directed out the door, Will was looking at her intently in the mirror, his eyes blazing. As she watched, they changed from striking emerald to a pale cat green—exactly like what she'd seen in the mirror when she herself had begun to change.



*Lynx*, she thought as Jake pressed deep inside her, filling her with his cum. *My God, he's like me – a Lynx just like Jake said.* The strange shock of recognition, though she had never seen him before in her life, left her shaken and upset but her emotions didn't seem to matter to her body.

For a long, breathless moment their gazes held as the orgasm rolled through her, tightening her nipples and making her lower body clench helplessly around the thick, invading cock. Maddy bit her lower lip, unable to look away even as the pleasure swept through her, making her tremble in Jake's arms.

There was a burning desire in Will's pale green cat eyes—a hunger that matched her own as he watched his friend fuck her to orgasm. Then, like a mask coming down, his expression changed abruptly to one of mocking amusement and he winked at her broadly before looking away from the mirror.

It seemed to take forever but at last Jake let her go. Maddy wrapped the afghan around her again and stumbled to the bathroom. She brushed past Will as she went, careful not to touch him with her bare skin in any way. The last thing she needed was to feel the same electric jolt she'd felt when Jake first touched her—she was confused enough already without anything like that.

Once in the bathroom she struggled to get control of her breathing. God, what was wrong with her? Why hadn't having the embarrassment of having another man watch as Jake fucked her stopped her from coming? It seemed like her body was on autopilot and would do what it wanted whether she agreed with it or not. And yet, having Will in the room hadn't inhibited her orgasm at all. In fact, if she was honest, looking into his eyes in the mirror while Jake touched her and took her had made the pleasure she felt even more intense. Which didn't make any sense because she wasn't now and never had been an exhibitionist.

It was Jake she wanted. Jake she cared for. Jake she...loved? Yes, Maddy decided, sitting down on the steps leading up to the massive tub to think. She did love him. It was crazy and stupid and impossible since she'd only known him a little over twenty-four hours but she did. She loved him. He made her feel safe and cared for and cherished in a way no other man ever had. If she had her way she would spend a lot more time with him—maybe the rest of her life.

But would that be allowed now that his friend, the Lynx shifter, had shown up? There was no denying she'd felt a spark of attraction when he looked at her with those burning eyes so like her own. It was a spark based on kinship, on the innate knowledge that their bodies were made to go together. But was that enough to make her want to forget about Jake?

Absolutely not, Maddy decided at once. Jake was good and kind and an incredible lover. He was the man she wanted—not some stranger who was supposed to be right for her because they had the same genes. Still, those pale green cat eyes kept popping up in her head, no matter what she thought.

It was all very confusing.

Maddy stood with a sigh and unwrapped the afghan for what felt like the hundredth time. She hoped that she was cured enough to wear her regular clothes now—she was tired of wandering around half naked. But all thoughts of getting dressed vanished when she saw her own naked body. Because though she felt great physically, she looked *terrible*.

There were love bites and red marks where Jake's whiskers had rubbed her all over her pale skin. Not to mention the dark finger-shaped bruises on her hips and the copious amounts of his seed sliding down her thigh. It was embarrassing, really, to see how thoroughly he'd taken her yet for some reason Maddy felt no shame—only pleasure in the marks of her lover's hands and mouth on her body. She felt sore inside too but it was a warm, pleasurable ache—the feeling of having been fucked hard and well until her hungry body had finally had enough. It was a strange way to think after years of considering herself frigid but there was no denying it was true. *Funny*, she thought, *I'm like an anorexic who suddenly discovered that food is pretty good after all*.

Well, now that her appetite, so to speak, was satiated it was time to clean up and Maddy decided to make good use of the huge tub. Going up the steps, she twisted the taps wide open. The tub filled rapidly with steaming hot water, making Maddy impatient to climb in. She hadn't had a proper bath since she'd moved out after her breakup with Kevin and the tub was so deep she was certain she'd be able to float free in it—an unheard-of luxury.

In fact, the only thing missing was some bubble bath. Maddy looked around the tub and under the sink in vain but found only a plain bar of soap and a bottle of off-brand shampoo. *Should have thought to look earlier and I wouldn't have been worried about another woman in Jake's life*, she thought, resigning herself to a bubbleless bath. *There's no way a woman could have a tub like this without having tons of bath products to go with it*. She thought longingly of the bathroom cabinet back at her apartment that was crammed with all the scented oils, bubble baths and foaming crystals she hoped to be able use again when she found a place with a tub. But there was no use wishing for what she couldn't have. Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the steaming water and submerged herself up to her chin.

As the water wrapped her in warmth and comfort, Maddy found she didn't mind not having bubbles. Just being in such a huge, beautiful tub was enough for her. As the heated liquid soaked away her aches and pains she tried to let her mind drift as free as her body, willing herself not to think of the strange situation she found herself in. But somehow her mind wouldn't obey.

*What happens now?* That was the thought she kept returning to, worrying it from every angle like a hungry dog with a bone. Technically her heat was over—at least for this month—so she ought to be able to leave Jake and go back to her own place. The trouble was, she didn't *want* to leave him. Unfortunately she didn't know if he felt the same way.

Also, what kind of trouble would they be in for breaking the tribal taboo? She'd been trying to keep away from that thought all night as Jake made love to her over and over but now it popped to the surface of her brain and refused to be banished. Would Jake be shunned by his tribe, by the wolf pack he used to run with? But he'd said he was a lone wolf now so what difference would that make? And what would happen to Maddy herself? Would the Lynx tribe refuse to take her in now that she'd slept with a Wolf? Well, what did she care? She'd rather come back to Jake every month whenever she was in heat than go with some stranger, anyway, she told herself.

*Even if that stranger is Will Tanner?* her mind asked before she could stop it. For a moment she allowed herself to remember the burning desire she'd seen in his eyes before he'd looked away from her. Then she held her nose and ducked her head underwater to try to banish the thought.

But when her head broke the surface it was still pounding in her brain and with it, an image she seemed powerless to escape—the image of herself, caught between the two men with Jake's scarred, muscular form behind her and Will's green cat eyes in front of her.

Maddy soaked as long as she could but eventually her stomach began to rumble. It suddenly occurred to her that in satisfying one appetite she had neglected another. She hadn't had a thing to eat in over twenty-four hours and she'd been doing some pretty strenuous exercise in the meantime—no wonder she was starving.

Feeling weak in the knees from hunger, she climbed carefully out of the water and wrapped herself in a long, dark green bathsheet she found folded to one side of the tub. She found another, smaller towel to wrap around her long, dripping hair and then made her way out into the hall, shivering at the contrast between the warm humidity of the bathroom and the chillier air in the rest of the cabin.

To her relief the bedroom appeared unoccupied and even better, her clothes were folded in a neat pile at the foot of the bed. Maddy pulled them on quickly, hoping that Will wouldn't suddenly walk in on her, claiming that it was rude not to watch someone getting dressed. The thought of his gaze on her naked body twice in one night was too much to contemplate.

She was half afraid that her skin would still be too sensitive to wear her regular clothes but she was able to get into everything but the bra without a problem, which calmed her tense nerves considerably. She tried the bra twice but the pink lace that made up the cups was simply too scratchy to bear. A quick examination of her nipples showed that they were a little smaller and not quite such a dark pink, however, which made Maddy hopeful that she might be able to wear it soon. In the meantime she slipped the green button-down sweater on and made sure every button was buttoned. It hung on her wrong without a bra and the V-neck was still low enough to show the top swells of her breasts but considering that both men currently occupying the cabin had seen much more of her, she decided not to stress about it.

Still drying her hair with the smaller towel, she padded barefoot into the living room where someone had taken the time to build a fire in the fireplace. *Mmm*. For a

moment Maddy stood in front of the fire, turning at angles to get the warmth into her bones. Aside from being hungry she felt so much better—it was like she was a different person. *The perfect cure for pain, depression and general malaise – getting screwed until you can't see straight*, she thought and laughed softly to herself.

Finally feeling warm enough, she moved away from the fire and was about to turn the corner into the kitchen-dining area of the cabin when she heard a low masculine voice speaking and froze in her tracks.

"Be hell to pay, you know," the voice she recognized as Will's said.

Someone—Jake—sighed heavily. "Yeah, I know. But what could I do? We waited for you as long as we could, Will. And then she was there—at the crisis point. I swear to God I never saw a female go over so quick. Scared the shit outta me."

"I bet." Will sounded sympathetic. "And I'll back you up and testify that I couldn't get here in time, but you know how much effect that's going to have on the council of elders."

"Yeah, I know. They'd rather see somebody dead than break one of their precious rules." Jake sounded bitter.

"It's more than a rule, Jake. It's a taboo that dates back to the time when the tribes first separated. You've just done the equivalent of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit."

"I was kicked outta the garden a long time ago," Jake growled. "I'm a lone wolf now and that's the way I like it."

"All wolves will be subject to pack law, even if they have declared lone-wolf status," Will returned seriously, sounding like he was quoting some kind of rule or law. "There's no getting out of this one, compadre. You're going to have to pay the piper."

"I know, I know." Jake sighed again. "But you know, I can't find it in myself to be too upset about it—for me anyway. I'll take my licks like a good little wolf. Who I'm most worried about is Maddy—I wish we could have waited for you for her sake. The fact that I was the first to breed her is gonna make things so much harder for her in the long run."

"I wish you could have waited too." There was a wistful note in Will's voice that surprised Maddy. She'd already gotten the new shifter pegged as arrogant and annoying but now he sounded almost sincere. "Not just for her body either," he added, making her even more confused. "Although she's goddamn gorgeous, I have to admit. But there's something else about her..."

"Yeah, she's special, all right." Jake's voice was low and slightly choked. "A real special girl. Will, you know they won't let me keep her—won't let us be together for long."

The words sent a shiver of fear down Maddy's spine but Will made a noise of assent, as though there was no doubt in his mind Jake was right. "I know, buddy," he said softly.

"I want you to be her champion," Jake said. "Take care of her, Will. Don't let anybody hurt her and don't let her hurt herself. You and I both know that a first heat is unpredictable. Don't let her put off her needs out of misguided loyalty to me."

Will gave what sounded like a very unhappy laugh. "If you're asking me to keep her from falling for you, I'd say that ship has sailed, Jake. I saw the way she looked at you—she's yours now."

"She can't be." Jake sounded frustrated. "They won't *let* her be. But they might let her be yours, Will, if you're willing to put yourself in that position—if you're willing to be her champion. God knows I don't want to give her up but I'm not gonna have a choice. I need you to tell me you'll take care of her—if you won't, I don't know what I might do. What I might be capable of." Jake's voice was dark, fatalistic almost, Maddy thought.

"Don't talk that way. You're too practical to go out in a blaze of glory and we both know it." But Will sounded uncertain. "Besides, you don't have to ask me twice—I'll do it. I can see how important she is to you, Jake. I swear I'll do everything in my power to keep her safe."

Jake sighed, sounding both sorry and relieved. "Thanks, Will. That's a load off my mind. Knowing you'll be there to protect her makes it a little easier to give her up."

*Give me up? Is he serious?* Maddy felt the sudden sting of tears in her eyes. So Jake *wasn't* interested in continuing their relationship. But what the hell else was he talking about? It sounded as though he expected some kind of punishment—as though he'd committed some horrible crime by sleeping with her and now he had to pay... But what really hurt was the fact that he seemed to think he could just give her away to Will. Like she was an object—something he owned and could loan out or swap out anytime he felt like it.

The paralysis that had been freezing her to the spot finally broke and she marched around the corner and pointed a finger at Jake. "I heard what you were talking about. I don't understand all of it but I can tell you this—I am *not* going to be given away to your friend like some kind of a...a toy that you're tired of. If you don't want me—fine. If everything we did tonight means nothing to you, well that's fine too. But I refuse to be treated like you own me just because we had sex."

"Whoa, darlin'. Just wait one minute." Jake was sitting at the small table with the red-checked cloth but now he stood up, holding out one hand in a conciliatory gesture. "I didn't mean—"

"I don't care what you meant, I'm leaving." Maddy held out her hand. "Give me the keys to my truck."

"Look, darlin', you can't just leave," Jake protested. "Not now."

Maddy glared at him. "Watch me. Where are the keys?"

"I think he means you can't leave now unless you can drive through three-foot snow drifts." Will's voice was dry. He had remained seated at the table, his long legs crossed casually like a big, lazy cat.

At least he was more than half dressed now, she noticed distractedly. He was wearing a plain white button-down shirt untucked and with the collar open at the neck over his faded jeans. The white fabric emphasized his broad shoulders and looked damn good with his tan skin but Maddy didn't care how GQ casual-sexy he looked—as far as she was concerned everything had been perfect before he arrived and now it was all going to hell.

She turned her glare on him. "You're lying. If the snow is so high how did *you* get here?"

"I ran," Will said blandly. He looked up at her and for a moment his eyes flashed from emerald to pale green.

"You—" Maddy began but Jake interrupted her.

"Will changed forms and ran ten miles through the snow to get here, Maddy," he said quietly. "That's a big expenditure of heat and energy. I know you don't understand now but you'll get it after your first change."

"Which is why I'm so glad you have a fireplace big enough to roast a pig in and a well-stocked fridge," Will grinned at his friend. Picking up half of a rare roast beef sandwich that was sitting on the table in front of him, he took a huge bite of it.

Despite her anger, Maddy could feel her stomach growling and she suddenly felt so weak she could barely stand. "I-I think I'd better sit down," she murmured, putting a hand to her head.

"Here." Jake seated her quickly at the table—unfortunately right across from Will. "You okay?" he asked anxiously, crouching down to look in her eyes.

Maddy didn't want to look at him. "I'm fine. Just hungry and upset."

"Well we can fix at least one of those." Jake straightened up and went for the refrigerator. "What's your pleasure, darlin'? I have roast beef, ham, smoked turkey... Which one? Or all three? I can do a club if you want."

Maddy made a face. "Um, thanks but do you have anything else? I'll pass on the cold cuts—I'm a vegetarian."

Jake and Will exchanged a look and suddenly both of them were laughing—deep rumbling bass chuckles that seemed to vibrate through Maddy's entire body.

"I'm sorry, you're a what?" Will, still laughing, was staring at her like she was crazy.

"A *vegetarian*," Maddy snapped—she didn't like being laughed at, especially if she didn't get the joke. "Maybe you've heard of it—we don't eat meat?"

"Well you're gonna have to start," Jake said practically. "Seriously, darlin', you can't be a shifter and not eat meat."

Maddy crossed her arms over her chest. "Why not? I've gone this long without it—I think I can survive a little while longer." *Like the rest of my life. Meat—ugh!*

"How long is 'this long'?" Will asked her, looking curious. "I mean, how long have you been a vegetarian?"

Maddy shrugged. "I don't know—forever. Since the beginning of high school, I guess. We had a guest lecturer from PETA and what she said really hit home with me. I haven't eaten any meat since."

"Hmm." Will turned to Jake. "You said this was her first heat, right? You think this could have anything to do with it coming on so late?"

Jake frowned. "It's possible, I guess. That and the fact that she's been living with humans and never caught a male's scent before I met her the other night."

Maddy put a hand on her hip. "Hello? Do you mind *not* talking about me like I'm not here?"

"Sorry, darlin'. But you've been living on rabbit food for over ten years?" Jake looked at her with real concern. "Seriously, Maddy, that's a really bad idea for a shifter."

She lifted her chin. "It hasn't killed me yet."

"It might soon," Will said flatly. "You can't change without some animal protein to get you over the crux."

Maddy frowned at him. "The what?"

"The mid-point of the change," Jake explained. "Your body needs a helluva lot of energy to change from human to animal and if you can't get over the hump..."

"You could be stuck in between forever." Will made a face. "It doesn't happen often but when it does, it's not a pretty picture."

Maddy felt herself go cold all over. "Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack." Will grinned at her. "Luckily for you, Jake has a veritable smorgasbord of dead animals in the fridge for you to feast on."

"C'mon, darlin', how about I make you a nice turkey sandwich?" Jake smiled at her hopefully. "That's not too bad, is it?"

"I..." Maddy looked between him and Will and saw that they really weren't kidding. "I guess so," she said reluctantly. "But it might make me sick—I haven't eaten any kind of animal flesh since I was thirteen."

"We'll take it slow," Jake promised her, going to the refrigerator and getting out a stack of ingredients. "But you need to get some real nourishment in you—and that means meat—before you change tomorrow night."

"What? How do you know I'm going to change tomorrow night?" Maddy put a hand to her chest protectively, remembering the way it had started turning into a paw earlier.

"Because that's the last night we'll have to do a controlled change together," Jake said. He kept his gaze directed on the counter, concentrating on the sandwich he was putting together, but Maddy thought he sounded sad. "After that both my tribe and yours are going to show up and then...well, then we'll be out of time."

"What? Why are they coming here?" Maddy demanded, feeling cold all over again. "You're here and...and Will's here." She nodded at Will who gave her an annoying

wink in return. "So we have everyone we need, don't we? I mean, in terms of male shifters. And my heat's over anyway—so why should they bother coming all the way down here?"

"They're coming because you're a fertile female—which is becoming more and more rare in the shifter communities," Will said seriously. "The tribes are dying out because not enough purebred children are being born."

Maddy stared at him in horror. "You're saying they expect me to be some kind of a...a brood mare? A baby factory?"

"Nothing like that, darlin'," Jake hastened to assure her. "Don't worry, nobody's gonna expect you to start popping out kids. But they *do* expect you to pick at least one male to breed with."

"That's easy—I pick you." Maddy looked at him but Jake only shook his head.

"Sorry, darlin'. But I'm out of the running on this one."

"But...but we've already done that—the breeding, I mean." Maddy blushed as she said it but went on doggedly. "So they can't tear us apart now, can they? I mean, aren't we already an established couple?"

Will shook his head. "You really *don't* understand shifter ways, do you?"

"Why should I have to?" Maddy lifted her chin and gave him an angry look. "I don't care if we share the same genetics, I refuse to let anyone dictate to me how to live or who I can love. Or care about," she said hastily, trying not to push Jake into a corner in case he had commitment issues.

Jake looked up at her, his pale blue eyes filled with emotion. "I love you too, darlin'. But it's not as simple as that. All shifters are subject to the laws of their tribes and just because you've been raised human doesn't mean you're exempt."

"Then I'll leave. Jake, please—we can leave together." Maddy looked at him appealingly. "Look, you have skills you can use anywhere and I can always get a new job. Nursing jobs are a dime a dozen. We can go somewhere nobody knows us—"

"They'll track you down." Will's face said he wasn't joking. "Shifters are the best trackers in the world. There's no place you could go they couldn't find you. And no place you could go they wouldn't follow."

Maddy didn't want to seem girly and weak but she could feel hot tears rising to her eyes. She blinked them back grimly. "So we're stuck? There's nothing we can do but wait for them to show up?"

Jake looked miserable. "Yeah, that's about the size of it, darlin'. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called them in the first place but I was trying to find you a Lynx male before you reached your crisis point."

Will gestured with his sandwich. "It wouldn't have mattered if you called or not. The Lynx elders would have felt her go into heat."

Jake frowned. "All the way from the Adirondacks? You think?"



Will nodded. "Are you kidding—an unmated purebred female? I *know*. Don't forget, cats are more sensitive than dogs." He grinned at Jake who gave him a halfhearted smile back.

"Yeah—lazier too. You know the average cat sleeps eighteen hours a day?"

"But he has enough fun the other six hours to make up for it."

Maddy was in no mood for jokes. "This isn't funny. What are we supposed to do?"

"Nothing we *can* do," Will said, taking another bite of his sandwich. "But wait."

"And right now you can eat. Need to get your strength up before your first change." Jake put a turkey sandwich in front of her. Maddy noticed it had lots of lettuce and tomato but there was almost an inch of turkey meat on it as well. God, could she really eat this...this animal flesh? She picked up the sandwich—which was on toasted rye bread—and looked at it doubtfully.

"Just give it a try, darlin'," Jake urged. "It's important you get some animal protein in you."

Maddy brought the sandwich closer and took a sniff, expecting to be repulsed. She'd been a strict vegetarian for years and not just because she felt strongly about animal rights, although that was part of it. The other part was that she had never much cared for the smell and taste of meat—so giving it up wasn't that big of a sacrifice. However this sandwich smelled...different somehow. Good. Delicious, actually.

Experimentally, she took a tiny bite. And then another and another. *God, this is amazing! What did he put on it to make it so good?* Maddy found she couldn't stop. Before she knew it she was eating the last bite and looking at Jake who was grinning at her.

"Pretty good, huh, darlin'?" he said, obviously happy she'd eaten the whole thing.

"The best sandwich I've ever had," Maddy said truthfully. "What did you put on it to make it taste so good? Was it some kind of condiment?"

Jake shook his head. "Nothing but turkey, lettuce and tomato. You want another?"

"Yes, please, if you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind," Jake said gruffly. "A male likes to feed his female, especially after her heat."

"Then it's a good thing I'm still so hungry," Maddy said, surprising herself with her own eagerness. It wasn't just that she was starving either—the turkey had really tasted good. *Maybe Jake is right. Maybe now that the shifter part of me is waking up I do need meat so my body craves it,* she speculated. It almost made her wonder if the other lunchmeats would taste as good. Nibbling her lower lip, she eyed the other half of Will's rare roast beef curiously.

Will caught her looking at his sandwich and laughed. "Looks like someone's discovering their inner carnivore. You want a bite?"

"Well..." Maddy wanted to say no—despite the strange and disturbing attraction she'd felt for him she still thought the Lynx shifter was kind of a jerk. But she found

herself leaning forward despite herself—the roast beef sandwich suddenly looked too good to pass up.

“Come on, try it—Jake makes a hell of a sandwich. Here.” Will lifted the other half of the sandwich and held it out to her temptingly.

Reluctantly, Maddy leaned over and took a bite. The flavor of the roast beef, rare and tender and much more succulent than the turkey, exploded over her taste buds, making her want a second bite almost immediately.

“Mmm,” she almost moaned. How had she never known that roast beef tasted so good before? It was amazing!

Will laughed again and gave her some more, holding a hand under her chin to catch any crumbs. “That’s right, take as much as you want,” he murmured. “As much as you need.”

Something in his tone made Maddy look up from the sandwich and meet his eyes. With a start she realized they were pale green again and the look in them was the same one she’d seen in the mirror while Jake made her come. Desire blazed there—hot enough to consume them both if she let it.

She flicked her gaze to Jake and saw he was watching Will feed her the sandwich. But the look on his face wasn’t anger or jealousy—it was resignation and regret. *A male likes to feed his female*, he had said just a moment before. Was that what Will was doing? Feeding her? And did he honestly think that it would make any difference in how she felt about him? How she felt about Jake?

Maddy sat back in her chair abruptly, her appetite gone. “I, uh, don’t think I’m hungry anymore,” she said, looking down at her hands.

Across the table from her Will sighed. “Lost your appetite, huh? I seem to have that effect on already-bonded females.” His voice was light but there was a note of longing in it that made her look up at him again.

There was a mocking little smile on his full lips that made Maddy think he was joking but his eyes were back to normal and there was a look in them that made her wonder. She looked away quickly.

“I think I’m really just tired,” she said, and suddenly it was true. The food in her stomach seemed to be acting like a sleeping pill, making her yawn uncontrollably. “Is it okay if I sleep on your couch, Jake?” she asked sleepily.

Jake frowned. “Don’t be silly, darlin’—go to bed. Will and I have a few more things to discuss but we’ll be in later.”

Maddy had already started to stand up but now she sat down again. “Um...both of you? Is someone going to sleep on the floor?” She looked pointedly at Will who stared blandly back.

Jake sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “No, darlin’, we’re all sleeping on the bed. But I promise you that’s all that’s going to go on—just sleeping.”

Maddy crossed her arms over her breasts protectively, feeling suddenly wide awake. "Fine—you two sleep on the bed. I'm taking the couch." She stood up and started to go but Jake grabbed her arm and stopped her.

"I'm sorry, Maddy, but we need you to share the bed with us."

"What? *Why?*" Maddy glared at him, feeling cornered. "Look, if you need something between you to keep the gay cooties away use a pillow. I told you, I'm *not* interested."

Will threw back his head and laughed. "You think Jake and I are gay?"

"Not until you started wanting to sleep together," Maddy shot back. "Now—who knows?"

"I can tell what you're thinking but you're wrong." Jake was still holding her arm gently but firmly. "This isn't about Will and me trying to cop a feel, Maddy." He grinned. "And it sure as hell isn't because we're afraid we might go gay in the middle of the night if you're not with us."

"What's it about then?" Maddy looked at him challengingly.

"It's about scent transference." Will stood up and came to stand on her other side. "Right now you're bonded to Jake because he bred you."

"That's right, he did," Maddy said, frowning up at him. "And you know what? I wanted him too—wanted it to be *him*."

"I'm sure you did," Will said evenly, ignoring her implied insult. "But now you've got his scent all over you. So it's obvious to any shifter with a nose what happened between you."

"So?" Maddy put a hand on her hip.

"So, it's like a slap in the face to the tribal elders. Like saying, look at us, we broke the rules and we don't give a damn what you think about it."

"What?" Maddy shook her head. "That doesn't make any sense. How can a smell say all that?"

"Smells can say that and more in the shifter world, Maddy," Jake said seriously. "It's our keenest sense—the one we rely on the most."

"So by having us all sleep together you're hoping to make me smell more like Will and less like you?"

"Among other things," Will muttered.

Maddy looked at him sharply. "What *other* things?" she demanded but Jake broke in.

"We're not trying to fool the elders—there's no way you can. They have the sharpest senses in the shifter communities. But at least this way we're not rubbing their noses in it." He looked thoughtful. "It would be even better if it was just you and Will together in the bed and I took the couch—"

Maddy's response was immediate. "Huh-uh. No way. No offense," she said, glancing at Will. "But I don't even know you."

"You didn't know *me* before last night, darlin'," Jake reminded her gently.

"I know but...but that's different. It's...I..." Maddy struggled, trying to explain both to Jake and herself. "I feel like I've known you forever," she said at last. "I know that's silly but I do."

"It's not silly at all, darlin'. I feel the same way." Jake smiled. "But at least part of that has to do with scent too."

"So you're saying I only feel close to you because of the way you smell?" Maddy shook her head. "Huh-uh, Jake. Sorry but I don't buy that."

"A female in heat is driven to bond with the most suitable available male. In your case the only male," Will said in a detached, clinical voice. "The things you do together when a female is in heat...well, most females wouldn't want to do them with a stranger. So your hormones take over and bingo—" He snapped his fingers. "Instant bond."

Maddy narrowed her eyes at him. "Well isn't that a neat little scientific explanation? A little *too* neat if you ask me. Let me tell you, Will—I don't believe that Jake and I...bonded or whatever just because he was the only available male. And I don't believe the only reason I feel like I do for him is his scent. The fact is he helped me through what could have been a really nightmarish experience and instead made it really..." She could feel herself blushing but forced herself to go on anyway. "Really positive. So I'm not sorry he was the one to be with me. To...to breed me. In fact, I'm really *glad*."

Will frowned. "If you knew the consequences of your actions you might not be so happy right now."

"What consequences?" Maddy frowned at both of them. "What is the Lynx tribe going to do to us when they get here, anyway—shun me because I slept with a Wolf instead of another Lynx? What do I care? I've lived all my life without them—I can keep managing just fine at this point, thank you very much."

"Oh they won't like it that you broke the taboo, that's for damn sure," Will said darkly. "But you won't be punished—a young, fertile female is too valuable to damage for any reason. Jake here is the one who'll be paying."

"What?" Maddy looked up at Jake, feeling suddenly cold all over. "What will they do to you, Jake? Please tell me they won't hurt you."

Jake let go of her arm and pulled her into an embrace instead. "Everything's gonna be just fine, darlin'. Don't you worry about me." He shot a glare at Will. "Don't scare her."

"I *do* worry about you." Maddy buried her face in his chest, breathing in his familiar spicy scent. "And it's not like it was your fault what happened." She looked over at Will. "He did the only thing he could to save me—I was starting to change and the pain was...indescribable."

Will's stern expression softened a bit. "I know and believe me, I'll testify to the fact before the council of elders when I advocate for Jake. But it might not do much good—shifters take their laws pretty seriously and when you break one you have to pay."

The words *that's not fair* trembled on Maddy's lips but she swallowed them back. After the life she'd had, growing up in foster homes and always feeling like an outsider, she knew first-hand that life wasn't fair. Instead she raised her chin. "I want to speak for Jake too. I'll tell the council exactly what happened and that he actually saved me. If he hadn't recognized what I was the other night I'd probably be dead right now."

Will nodded. "I'll ask that your testimony be allowed."

"As well as being a lawyer in the human community, Will here is also the shifter equivalent of an attorney," Jake put in, giving his friend a grin. "Hey, what do you call ten thousand lawyers at the bottom of the ocean?"

Will rolled his eyes. "A good start. Enough with the lawyer jokes, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. You know you love it." Jake gave him a friendly punch on the arm and Will pretended to flinch even though it was clear that they would be a pretty even match if they wanted to fight. Jake might have been a little more muscular but Will was about an inch taller with a pretty powerful build himself. His features were a little finer than Jake's and his golden brown hair was neatly trimmed, giving him a slightly more refined look, but there was something feral lurking just below the surface of both men.

With his rugged looks, wild hair and the white scars that marked his big body, Jake's menace was more out in the open—like a growling dog. But there was a definite sense of danger hanging around Will as well, it was just more contained. It was crouched in the depths of his green eyes like an animal that looks asleep but can come awake in an instant. *Like comparing a mountain lion to a mastiff*, Maddy thought, looking at the two of them together.

"The sun will be up in another couple of hours, darlin'," Jake said, breaking her train of thought. "Why don't you just go to bed? I promise when Will and I come in we'll leave you alone."

Maddy closed her eyes and leaned her head against Jake as a profound sense of weariness swept through her again. *I'm so tired. I don't want to think about any of this anymore.* "Fine," she said aloud. "I'll go to bed. At this point I don't care where I sleep or who I sleep with."

Jake barked a laugh. "Wow, keep the compliments coming—you're great for a guy's ego."

Maddy gave him a wan smile and started toward the bedroom but her feet were suddenly too heavy to move and she stumbled. Jake and Will both reached out to catch her but Jake was closer and got to her first. He swung her up into his arms as though she weighed no more than a little girl.

"C'mon, darlin'. Let's get you to bed," he rumbled.

Maddy was too tired to protest. The energy she'd gotten from her sandwich and the few bites of Will's she'd taken seemed to have dissipated completely, leaving her

exhausted. She leaned her head against Jake's broad shoulder and let him carry her through the cabin and into the bedroom. He laid her gently down on the bed but as he was about to straighten up, Maddy put a hand on his arm to stop him.

"Wait..." She was so tired it was hard to think straight but she still wanted some answers. "Jake, you never told me why."

He frowned. "Why what?"

"Why we all have to sleep together. I mean, I know you want me to smell like Lynx and not Wolf but Will acted like there was some other reason too."

Jake looked unhappy. "Darlin'..."

"Please, Jake, I need to know." As tired as she was Maddy managed to prop herself up on her elbows and look him in the eyes.

He sat down on the bed beside her and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Okay but you're not going to like it. It's to make it easier for you to...to transfer your feelings to Will."

"What?" Maddy felt suddenly wide awake again. "Jake, no—you can't be serious. I can't take how I feel about you and make myself feel it for him instead. That's crazy."

"Not as crazy as you might think," he said grimly. "Look, Maddy, I was the first to breed you so you and I formed a connection—you bonded with me. That's going to make you hostile to another male coming into your personal space for a while and that's normal—it's shifter biology. But you *have* to try to get over that. Have to give Will a chance—he's a good guy and he can protect you from the other Lynx males."

Maddy frowned. "But why can't *you* protect me?"

"Because chances are they're going to want you to pick a Lynx male as your mate. And if you don't like the choices they bring with them you'll have to go up to the Lynx tribal grounds to meet the rest."

"But...you said you'd stay with me," she half whispered. "You said you'd take me to the Lynx tribe yourself and that you'd keep me safe."

A look of anguish crossed Jake's face. "That was before we did what we did, darlin'. I won't be able to go with you up to the Lynx grounds now because my own people—the Wolf tribe—will keep me here for punishment."

"What kind of punishment?" Maddy felt like her heart was in her throat and she couldn't breathe or swallow past it. What were they going to do to Jake for helping her?

He shrugged a little too carelessly. "Don't know. Whatever the council of elders decides on. I don't want you to worry though—as long as I know you're okay I'll be fine."

Maddy put her arms around his waist, pressing her face to his chest. "I don't want to lose you. I know it's crazy to feel so strongly for you when we just met yesterday but I do. And I don't think it's just because you smell good enough to eat either."

Jake laughed, his deep chuckle vibrating through her comfortingly. "I feel the same way, darlin'. Pheromones and hormones aren't everything. There's such a thing as love at first sight too."

Maddy pulled back and looked at him. "If you really feel that way, how can you ask me to try to care about Will the way I care about you?"

He looked at her seriously. "Because I don't have any choice. I'd rather know you were safe with Will than out there unprotected on your own."

She frowned. "Do I really need a bodyguard just to meet the rest of the tribe?"

Jake nodded. "There are always more males than females so the competition for unmated females is intense. It's better that you take Will as your champion until you chose a mate so the other males will leave you alone."

"What does that mean—champion?"

Jake sighed. "It's a male who breeds you but isn't yet formally mated to you. Kind of like a fiancé."

"A male who breeds me? But I don't want to have sex with Will!" Maddy protested. "I mean, he's nice but he's not you."

A grim look passed over his face. "I know you feel that way now, darlin', but once the two of you are up there on the Lynx grounds you may feel differently."

"I don't care how close I am to him or how far I am from you, the way I feel for you is not going to change," she said stubbornly.

"I'm not asking you to forget me completely," Jake said earnestly. "I'm just saying that sometimes, especially with a first heat, females can have...relapses."

"But I thought my heat was over. At least until next month," Maddy protested.

He nodded. "And it should be. But you came to your first heat late—very late, actually—and your body may still be...hungry, for lack of a better word. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me at all if it takes you several months to get your cycle straight."

Maddy felt like someone had replaced her blood with ice water. "So you're saying that basically I could be subject to what amounts to lust seizures at any time for the next few months?"

Jake looked serious. "I don't want to scare you but it's better you know the truth. So yeah, it's possible. And if I'm not with you when that happens, you're going to need a male to help you out."

"To breed me, you mean. I get it," Maddy said dully. "You know, Jake, I always wanted to belong—to feel like I fit in somewhere—but I don't know if it's worth it."

He kissed her forehead. "Worth it or not, I'm afraid you're stuck with it, darlin'. I just want you to know that if anything happens, if your body starts telling you that you need to be bred, don't ignore it. Turning to Will to help you out isn't betraying me—it's just keeping yourself safe and sane and that's all I care about."

"But—"

Jake cut her off with another kiss, this time on her mouth. "I'm serious, Maddy. Go with your instincts and don't deny your needs."

"All I need is *you*." Maddy buried her face in his chest again. "And that's not going to change, Jake, no matter what."

At first it seemed like he might keep arguing with her but after a long moment he just hugged her close and sighed, "Oh darlin'."

Maddy breathed in his familiar, comforting scent—filled her lungs with it—and made herself a promise.

No matter what happened it was Jake that she wanted. And there was no way she was ever going to feel for Will the way she did for him.



## Chapter Nine

She was so deeply asleep she was barely aware of it when Jake and Will climbed in bed, one on either side of her. But she woke up sometime later feeling hot and uncomfortable from their combined body heat. Too sleepy to think about it, she wriggled out of her jeans and slipped off her sweater. Then, wearing only her lacy pink panties, she turned over on her side, sighed in relief and fell back asleep.

Maddy woke up slowly and the first thing she was aware of was the smell.

It wasn't a bad smell—more like a mixture of good smells. *Really* good smells, in fact. Coming from one side of her was a warm, spicy scent that seemed familiar and comforting. From the other was a scent like leather and fur and sharp, clean male musk. That smell wasn't as comforting as the first but it was very...intriguing. Maddy sniffed it cautiously, becoming more and more interested. Both scents were wild and masculine and both seemed important somehow but she couldn't remember why.

Coming a little more awake, she opened her eyes. She was in a darkened room with late afternoon sunshine slanting through closed blinds across the hardwood floor. At first she felt disoriented. *Where am I? This isn't my bedroom. And why did I sleep so late?* She tried to think but her brain felt fuzzy and her muscles ached, as though she'd been doing strenuous exercise the day before that wore her completely out. Only her sense of smell was clear, that and the ache between her thighs, which seemed to be growing.

Maddy stretched like a cat, feeling warm and safe despite the strange surroundings. There were two sleeping shapes on either side of her, she noted, but somehow it didn't bother her. Somehow it felt...right to be sleeping between the two of them. They were the source of the good smells that surrounded her and the feeling of comfort and safety that enveloped her. As long as she was here between them, everything was going to be all right.

"Mmm, you awake, darlin'?" A deep voice, rough with sleep, surprised her.

Maddy turned to her right and saw Jake looking at her through half-lidded eyes. Suddenly everything came back. Her heat, the pain and the wonderful relief when he had finally bred her. Then Will's arrival and the awful confusion and fear when she'd learned Jake would be taken from her.

"Jake," she whispered, cuddling into his arms. "I'm so...I'm naked," she realized out loud, lifting the dark blue bedspread, with its slightly shredded patches from her near change the night before, to look down at herself.

Jake frowned and looked down as well. "Don't look at me, darlin'. Will and I didn't touch you."

"I know you didn't. I-I think I remember taking off my jeans and sweater myself because I felt too hot." Feeling suddenly shy, Maddy put an arm over her full, naked breasts. *At least I still have my panties on*, she thought with some relief.

"Hey, don't cover yourself. You're beautiful." Jake put an arm around her, pulling her close so that her back was to his front. "Gorgeous," he murmured, palming her naked breasts in his big hands.

"Thanks," Maddy murmured nervously. "I don't mind you seeing me. But Will –"

"Is still asleep. And you need to be bred. I can smell it on you." Jake's nose twitched and he buried his face in her neck, kissing and licking until Maddy moaned and arched her back despite herself.

"We shouldn't." But the ache between her thighs was growing. It wasn't the sharp pain and cramping she'd experienced the day before, more like a deep desire that was rapidly becoming impossible to ignore. It was as if she hadn't eaten in days and her body was telling her she was desperately hungry and needed to get some nourishment immediately. Was this what Jake had meant by a relapse? Or was she simply being turned on by his scent, his nearness and the way he touched her?

"Why not?" Jake kissed her some more, concentrating on the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder while his long fingers twisted her nipples. "You need it – your body is hungry for it."

"Mmm...How do you know? Can you really tell so much from my scent?" she asked curiously.

"Oh yeah. Want me to prove it to you?"

"Prove you're right? Or prove I need...need to be bred?" she asked softly, her voice slightly breathless. God, he knew exactly how to touch her!

"Both." One large hand left her breasts and slid down her belly. Maddy moaned softly as his fingers slid under the lacy pink material of her panties and cupped her mound. "Spread your legs for me, darlin'. Just like last night," he growled softly in her ear.

"God, Jake," she whispered but did as he said, opening her thighs so that he could slip two long fingers deep in her throbbing cunt.

"See how wet you are, darlin'? How hot and slippery your sweet little pussy is for me?" he murmured, pumping his fingers deep inside her. "That's how I can tell I'm right. You need my cock and my cum inside you now. If you put it off you'll only get hungrier and hungrier until the pain comes back."

"I don't...don't want the pain to come back," Maddy admitted, gasping with pleasure as he finger-fucked her.

"Then let me breed you." Jake bit the side of her neck gently but possessively, as though wanting to mark her for his own. "Let me slide my cock deep in your pussy and fill you up with my cum, darlin'. We can be as quiet as you want."

Maddy felt herself melting. She knew that only forty-eight hours before, the idea of making love to one man while another she barely knew was sleeping only inches away would have made her intensely uncomfortable. But somehow now, with Jake kissing her neck and stroking her throbbing clit, it didn't seem so bad.

"Yes, okay, as long as we're quiet," she murmured, casting an apprehensive glance at Will's sleeping form. But the Lynx shifter was turned away from them, his broad back rising and falling steadily in the rhythm of sleep. So when Jake pulled her panties off and spread her legs even wider to accommodate his cock, she didn't protest even though she was still lying on her side, facing Will's direction.

"Good girl," Jake growled softly in her ear as he held her legs open and found the entrance of her pussy with the broad head of his cock. "That's a good girl, Maddy. Just open up and let me fuck you."

Moaning softly, she did.

Jake slid smoothly into her with one long powerful thrust, filling her to the hilt with his shaft. Maddy had to bite her lower lip to keep from crying out as he pumped inside her, stretching her to the limit with his thickness. She closed her eyes tightly and spread her legs even wider, trying to be open enough for him as he moved within her. It felt so good, so right to open to him. Already she could feel the pleasure building toward a peak and she knew that soon she would be coming hard, all around his cock, as he filled her with spurt after spurt of his cum. And all the time Jake kept talking to her, telling her how beautiful she was, how he loved to fuck her, to breed her. How he couldn't wait to come inside her...

And then she opened her eyes and saw Will looking at her, his own eyes filled with desire.

Maddy, who had been arching her back and angling her pelvis back to get as much of Jake's cock inside her as possible, froze. She was rigid—nailed to the spot by Will's gaze and the look of open lust in his eyes. *At least we're covered from the waist down*, she thought, grateful for the dark blue bedspread. But despite that, she knew it was obvious what they were doing. The way Jake was cupping her body with his own and their rhythmic motions while he stroked her breasts and pinched her nipples made it clear that his cock was buried to the hilt in her eager pussy and that she was loving every minute of it.

Jake must have felt her sudden lack of movement because he thrust deeply into her and held still, keeping them joined without moving. "Maddy?" he asked softly in her ear.

"Um...sorry we woke you up." She spoke to Will, not Jake, still feeling horribly embarrassed. "I, uh, I think I had sort of a relapse...my heat came back, I mean. And so I needed...Jake said..."

Will raised an eyebrow and smiled at her. "You don't have to explain to me, sweetheart. You needed to be fucked so Jake is taking care of you. That's okay."

"Well...I just..." Maddy felt a wave of embarrassment wash over her. It was exactly how she'd felt the night before when Will walked in on them just before she came. Only now the situation was much more intimate since they were all in bed together.

"Turn over, Will," Jake growled, glaring at the other man. "You know how Maddy feels about being watched."

"Sorry." Will started to comply but Maddy said,

"No, wait."

"What is it, darlin'?" Jake asked in her ear. "You want me to send him out of the room?"

"No, it's just that..." Maddy took a deep breath. "It's really...really the shifter way to...to watch?" She couldn't believe she was asking this but it had suddenly occurred to her that since she might have to go up to the Adirondacks and stay with the people who were supposed to be her kin, she ought to start getting used to their customs.

Jake rumbled assent and Will nodded. "It's considered rude not to."

"Well then..." Maddy nodded at the Lynx shifter, trying to control her urge to blush and run away. "You...I guess you can watch. We were almost...almost finished anyway."

"Good girl, Maddy," Jake murmured in her ear. "You'll get the hang of being a shifter yet."

"I think you will too." Will smiled, obviously having heard his friend's remark. Then, without warning, he pulled the covers off the three of them, revealing everything from the waist down.

"Oh!" Maddy had been pressing back against Jake but now she froze again. "What...?"

"When you invite another shifter to watch you breed, you don't limit his view," Jake told her softly. "Close your eyes if you need to, Maddy. Will won't touch you—he's just going to watch. This time."

Maddy tried not to think about what he'd meant by "this time". She felt like her entire body was blushing as Will's gaze swept over her and then stayed at the spot between her legs where Jake's cock was piercing her cunt.

"Beautiful," he murmured as Jake started thrusting into her again, picking up the rhythm of their intimate dance where he'd left off. "Just beautiful."

"Th-thank you," Maddy managed to stutter as pleasure once more swept over her like a warm wave. God, why couldn't she control herself? It seemed like no matter how embarrassed she was, or how strange the situation, her body was determined that she would come.

Will's eyes flicked up to her again. "How does it feel to have Jake inside you? Do you like having his cock deep in your pussy?"

"Yes, it feels...feels incredible," Maddy had to admit. She moaned softly as Jake lifted her top leg even higher to give himself more room to thrust into her vulnerable

cunt. She could feel Will's eyes on her there again, on the place where Jake was filling her, his thick shaft sliding in and out of her naked, open pussy. God, how could she keep putting on this live porno show and not die of embarrassment? How could she stand to have another man watch her get fucked and still feel the beginnings of orgasm tingling in the base of her spine?

"You're about to come, aren't you?" Will murmured, studying her face. "The feel of Jake filling you up is pushing you over the edge, isn't it?"

"Y-yes," she gasped, her eyes somehow locked with his. "I can't help it."

"I can see that," Will drawled. "May I have your permission to come too, Maddy?"

"I-I don't understand," she said uncertainly.

"Usually when you invite another shifter to watch they like to get in on the action," Jake explained in her ear. "In this case, Will knows you'd be uncomfortable with him touching you while I fuck you. But he wants your permission to touch himself while he watches you come on my cock."

"Oh...oh God!" It was getting harder and harder to think as Jake's cock pistoned into her helpless pussy, pushing her over the edge, as Will had said. "Yes, go ahead," she told the Lynx male who was waiting in perfect stillness for her answer. "I-I don't care what you do."

"Thank you." Will nodded his head courteously and then she saw him reach between his legs and grasp his own thick shaft. She watched, unable to look away, as he fisted himself in perfect rhythm with Jake's thrusts inside her pussy.

*What is he thinking?* she wondered as their eyes met and held again. *What is he imagining while he touches himself and Jake fucks me?*

Suddenly she felt herself starting to come, felt her orgasm breaking over her in a hot rush of pleasure that made her gasp and clench along Jake's invading length as he thrust into her. Jake must have felt her spasming around him because he pumped harder and deeper, trying to make her pleasure last.

"That's right, darlin'," he growled hoarsely. "Just let yourself go and come on my cock. God, you feel so good squeezing me that way. Can't wait to fill you up with my cum."

"Yes, God, yes...come inside me. Fill me up!" Maddy moaned, her eyes still locked with Will's even though it was Jake she was begging to fill her.

With a low groan, Jake allowed her orgasm to trigger his own and she felt the hot wet spurts of his cum inside her, soothing her burning need, satiating the terrible hunger she'd felt before he entered her.

And as she and Jake came together, she watched Will stiffen suddenly and knew he was orgasming too, allowing their pleasure to bring on his own. She looked down between his legs but all she could see was one large hand—Will was cupping himself, catching the results of his pleasure in his own palm as Jake pumped his into her pussy.

For a brief moment she had a strange, crazy wish to feel Will's cum inside her too, mixing with Jake's, filling her completely. Then she pushed the idea away. She was only interested in Jake, she told herself firmly. If Will wanted to watch, that was fine. But Jake was the one she wanted.

At last the three of them lay panting on the bed, the warm spill of pleasure over. Maddy closed her eyes again, shutting out Will's intense gaze, and let herself drift in the afterglow. She was halfway to going back to sleep when she heard Jake say, "Mark her."

"I don't know..." Will sounded doubtful but Jake said again,

"Mark her."

Maddy opened her eyes and looked at both of them. "What are you talking about?"

Jake had pulled out of her and was leaning over her, his eyes glowing golden in the dim room. "I'm talking about Will marking you with his scent. The elders will be here late tonight or early tomorrow morning. We might not get the chance again."

"What...what does marking involve?" Maddy started to cover herself instinctively but Jake stopped her with a gentle hand on her arm.

"He just has to rub his scent into your skin. It will help dilute mine and make the elders think—"

"Make them think Jake isn't the only one who's been fucking you," Will finished for him.

Maddy pressed back against Jake's broad back. "I don't know..."

"Don't worry, darlin' — Will doesn't actually have to breed you to make it smell like he did." Jake stroked her side reassuringly. "He just needs to rub some of his cum on you and inside you."

Maddy looked up at him uncertainly. "And if I let him, the elders will think that I'm at least trying to be with a Lynx and not just...just breeding with a Wolf, is that right?"

Jake nodded. "Uh-huh."

"So your punishment might be less?"

Jake shrugged his muscular shoulders. "Don't know. Maybe."

Maddy shifted so that she was lying on her back and looked up at Will. "Do it," she said. Anything that would keep Jake from being punished—or at least keep him from being punished as harshly as he might otherwise have been—was good as far as she was concerned.

Will nodded, his eyes sliding slowly over her naked body. "I'm just going to mark you with my seed," he murmured. "Try to relax, sweetheart. I'll make it quick."

Maddy nodded and closed her eyes, not wanting to see what was happening. But Jake kissed the side of her face and murmured that she should look.

"Watch Will touch you, darlin'," he rumbled in her ear. "This is a type of shifter ceremony and you have to be able to say you saw and acknowledged Will marking you while he did it."

"Okay." Maddy opened her eyes and watched as Will bent over her. He dipped into one palm with two fingers of his other hand and then swiftly brushed his fingertips over one of her bare nipples.

Maddy gasped at his touch, as the warm current of sexual electricity passed between them, the deep attraction that seemed to be an indicator of one available shifter to another. And then she got lost in the sensation of what Will was doing to her as he stroked her naked skin—first warmth and then coldness washed over her as what he had put on her cooled. *His cum*, she thought as his fingers flicked over her other nipple. *He's marking me with his cum just like Jake said.*

The thought should have repulsed her but instead she felt a surge of erotic pleasure as Will dipped into his palm again and stroked a warm, wet line down her trembling belly to the mound of her sex.

"Spread your legs," Jake instructed her, still murmuring softly in her ear. "Let Will mark inside you, darlin'."

Obediently, Maddy opened her thighs, her eyes never leaving Will's naked, muscular body as he leaned over her. "You say this is a shifter ceremony?"

"Mm-hmm," Jake murmured as Will carefully drew warm, wet lines along her outer pussy lips. "Usually the male doing the marking does it with his cock but in this case..."

"We thought you'd prefer it this way instead," Will said, finishing his friend's thought. "Get ready, Maddy, I'm going to spread my seed inside your pussy now," he said matter-of-factly.

"All...all right," she whispered, unable to look away as Will dipped his fingers into his palm again.

"Open a little wider, darlin'," Jake instructed. "Really spread your pussy open so Will can get his cum deep inside your sweet little cunt."

Maddy moaned and did as he said, feeling her swollen pussy lips part as Will leaned over her. First his long fingers slipped over her clit, coating her inner folds and teasing the delicate bundle of nerves until she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out. Then she watched, fascinated, as Will slipped two long fingers deeply inside her, spreading his cum to her inner cunt.

"That's a good girl," Jake murmured as Will pressed deep inside her. "Open up and let Will finger your sweet pussy. He has to get as deep as he can. Of course if he was using his cock and actually fucking you it wouldn't be a problem but this is a little harder."

"And not nearly as much fun." Will flashed a quick smile at her and then continued to press his fingers deep inside her. "Not that I'm complaining. God, you're tight, sweetheart."

"Isn't she?" Jake sounded proud and possessive at the same time. "She's gorgeous inside and out."

"God!" Maddy gasped as Will's probing fingers thrust deep inside her again. Even though she had just come she could feel the beginnings of another orgasm building. The question was, did she want to come with another man's fingers stroking deep in her pussy? She still didn't know how she felt about letting Will touch her so intimately. But though her mind was conflicted, her body was not and the pleasure continued to build.

Will was looking at her intently. "Do you feel like you could come again, sweetheart?" he asked softly, looking into her eyes. "Can you come while I finger your pussy? Because it would help get my seed deep inside you if you could."

"I-I think so," Maddy gasped. "Maybe if Jake touches me too."

Will nodded. "Touch her, Jake," he murmured to his friend. "Pet her clit while I pump inside her pussy."

Jake complied at once, sliding one long arm down her torso to the place where Will was fucking into her with his fingers. "That's right, darlin'," he breathed as he spread her pussy lips and began stroking gentle circles around her swollen clit. "Just let Will make you come."

"God!" Maddy couldn't help herself. She'd never been touched by two men at once before—had never dreamed that she would ever want or agree to such a thing. But despite her uncertainty she could feel the pleasure spiking inside her once more. Her back arched helplessly and her inner walls spasmed around Will's long fingers as he stroked into her and Jake petted her clit.

"Beautiful," Will murmured.

"Gorgeous," Jake whispered in her ear.

And then it was done. The waves of pleasure receded, leaving her gasping and satiated in a way she never had been before.

Reluctantly, Maddy thought, Will slid his fingers from her pussy and cleaned them thoroughly with his tongue. "Delicious," he said softly, his eyes never leaving hers. And then he made her a kind of half bow—more a formal nod of his head than anything else. "I thank you, Maddy, for letting me mark you with my scent and my seed. I revere your body, respect your will and worship your beauty."

"Um, thank you," Maddy said uncertainly but Jake shook his head.

"It's part of the ceremony, darlin'. The correct response is, 'I thank you, Will, for marking me with your scent and your seed. I will carry you within me from this day forward.'"

Maddy repeated the words and Will nodded at her, smiling. "Thank you, Maddy. It means a lot to me that you trusted me to mark you," he murmured. "I know you're bonded to Jake and you don't much care for me right now but I hope you'll give me a chance in the future."



She looked away, unable to meet the hopeful look in his eyes. How could she tell him that despite her participation in the shifter ceremony it was still only Jake that she wanted, only Jake that she loved?

After a strained moment of silence Jake spoke. "Well it's way past noon and I don't know about you two but I'm starving. Come on—let's grab a couple of steaks and see if we can work up the energy for our change tonight."

Just like that Maddy's mind was filled with a different set of worries. *The change. Tonight is the night I'll really, truly change into another creature. Into a lynx. What am I going to do?*

But Jake and Will were already getting off the bed and getting dressed. Maddy had to scramble to keep up and followed them uncertainly out of the bedroom after pulling on her discarded clothes.

## Chapter Ten

Maddy shivered in the chilly air outside the cabin, her arms crossed over her bare breasts protectively. But though she was cold, she wasn't freezing to death as she had supposed she would be when Jake had first told her to strip for the change. Possibly it had something to do with the huge amounts of red meat she'd been eating all day. At this point Maddy felt like she'd never be hungry again, but despite her apprehension about the coming change, the food in her stomach seemed to steady her. So maybe it was a *good* thing Jake had insisted she finish an entire porterhouse by herself. But even if she wasn't about to die of hypothermia, standing nude on a winter's night was still no fun.

"Do we *have* to be naked to do this?" she asked Jake, rubbing her upper arms briskly to try to keep warm.

"Sure do. Unless you want to ruin your only set of clothes." Jake sounded positively cheerful as he looked up at the full moon, riding high in the night sky. It shed a silvery radiance over the snowy woods, making everything look postcard perfect. Except you couldn't get frostbite from a postcard, Maddy reminded herself, her teeth chattering.

She was feeling extremely nervous about her first change despite the reassurances from Jake and Will that it wouldn't hurt now that she'd been bred. Apparently having a shifter male's cum inside her had changed her body chemistry in some complex way, making the change from human to animal easier and hopefully pain free. Maddy would have liked to hear a more detailed explanation—she'd always been interested in biology—but she was too busy worrying to ask. The memory of the searing pain in her hand, as though someone was doing surgery on it without any anesthetic, was still fresh in her mind and the idea of her whole body feeling such pain wasn't pleasant.

"The best thing about changing is that being in your animal form will hold off your urges—at least until you change back," Jake told her as they got ready to change.

"Getting tired of breeding me?" Maddy asked, only half kidding. Was Jake getting tired of having her around? She'd pretty much invaded his life and now he was going to get punished for helping her. She wouldn't blame him if he was ready to see the end of her.

Jake's response was immediate. "Never." He pulled her close for a lingering kiss. "But we need to stop now if we can. The more of my scent they smell on you, the more pissed the elders are gonna be."

"I understand." Maddy nodded, not wanting to add to his punishment. She knew that if she started feeling the deep desire again she ought to turn to Will instead of Jake. But she didn't want to. Will wasn't Jake and that was all there was to it.

Will seemed to sense that she was thinking of him because he cast her a sidelong glance from eyes that were already pale green. Maddy wondered if her own eyes were that color. But so far she didn't feel anything but cold. Nothing seemed to be clawing to get out of her, no wild, feral instinct was urging her to drop to all fours and run naked through the snow, hunting prey. Mainly she just wanted to go back inside and cuddle with Jake under the covers.

"When does it happen?" she asked, stamping her feet against the cold concrete of his porch to keep warm. "Does the moon have to be at a certain angle in the sky or what?"

Jake and Will looked at each other and burst out laughing. "No, darlin'," Jake said at last, shaking his head. "It helps to have a full moon—especially when you're a new shifter. But you don't *have* to have it to change. I've changed on a moonless night before when I had to—it's not easy but it can be done when you're in dire need. An experienced shifter can, anyway."

Maddy nodded, filing the information away for later. "Okay, but what about now? When are we going to change? I don't feel the least bit, uh, lynx-y."

"That's because you're not centered yet. You need to take a deep breath and concentrate on the animal part of you. Invite her forward, let her breathe in the cold night air, let her see the moonlight on the snow and scent the prey on the wind." Will took a deep breath as if to show her how, his arms stretched out theatrically in a grandiose gesture of welcome.

"Are you being sarcastic? Or are you serious this time?" Maddy asked flatly.

Will put a hand to his bare, muscular chest. "*Moi*, sarcastic? I'm hurt, sweetheart."

Maddy just glared at him. There was a sharp edge about Will that she didn't always care for. It was obvious he was smart—too smart for his own good, probably—but she could do without his witty little remarks, thank you very much. *You just don't like his sense of humor because it's not like Jake's*, whispered a voice in her head but Maddy shut it down quickly before it could go on talking about how she ought to give the Lynx shifter a chance.

Jake laughed again and slapped Will on the back. "He's just yanking your chain, darlin'. All you really have to do to start the change is concentrate. Will yourself to change and let the moon do the rest."

"All right. But...could one of you go first? And kind of, show me how it's done?"

"I'd be glad to be the object lesson." Will nodded at her. "Watch me carefully and you'll be able to see how your body will change." Then he took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

In a matter of seconds his body was shifting and changing—his bones and muscles flowing like they were made of hot wax. His face flattened and his ears moved to the top of his head and grew pointed with the distinctive lynx tufts at their tips. Golden brown fur sprouted all over his naked body as he sank to the ground, becoming a quadruped.

The only thing that didn't change, as far as Maddy, who was watching in horrified fascination, could see, was his body mass. As a human Will probably weighed around two hundred pounds of solid muscle and as far as she could see, he weighed that much as a lynx as well. The result was a predator much bigger than Maddy had expected. She didn't know much about lynxes but she was pretty sure they didn't get up to two hundred pounds—thirty or forty pounds was probably more their limit. So Will was huge for the type of animal he'd turned into—indeed, his furry head came up to her elbow even when he was standing on all fours.

"Oh my God! He really did it—he really changed." Maddy stared at the huge lynx standing in front of her wide-eyed. "I mean, I knew he was going to, I knew it was true but still..."

Jake nodded. "I know—it's like science fiction, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is. It really is." Maddy stared at the beast Will had become, fascinated. "Oh—what happened to his tail?" She bent carefully, looking at the stubby, barely-three-inch-long furry appendage.

Jake grinned. "Lynxes don't have long tails—that's why some people call them 'bobcats'. Like a Manx house cat, you know? Go ahead if you want to touch him—Will won't mind."

"He won't...bite me or scratch me?" Maddy asked, hesitantly reaching out a hand.

"Course not—you don't think exactly the same in your animal form but Will knows your scent. He won't lay a paw on you."

Carefully, slowly, Maddy reached out to pet the round, furry head, ready to pull back at any moment in case Jake was wrong. But to his credit, Will held perfectly still so that she could touch him. In fact, the only sound he made was when she stroked and scratched behind his ears. Then a deep, rusty-sounding purr came from his furry throat and vibrated his entire body.

Maddy laughed with surprised delight. "I think I like him better this way—he can't talk."

Jake grinned. "Yeah, he can be kinda mouthy but that's one of the things I love about him."

The huge lynx gave a last rumbling purr and then stepped away from Maddy's hand. It turned the full force of its pale green eyes on her and she had the strangest feeling she knew what it wanted.

Jake seemed to know too. "I think Will's saying it's your turn now, darlin'."

"I guess so." Maddy took a deep breath. "Just will myself to change, huh?"

"It's not hard," Jake promised her. "This is something your body needs to do—like eating and drinking and breathing. If you just close your eyes and let go you'll feel yourself flow into your other shape."

Maddy took another deep breath and did as he said. *Close my eyes and let it flow...let myself go...let myself change...*The problem was that the memory of the searing pain in

her hand was still in the back of her mind. That and the belief that even though she'd seen Will transform in front of her eyes, there was no way her own body could make a weird and supernatural transformation.

"Breathe," Jake murmured in her ear, his big body a warm and steady presence at her back. "Feel the animal inside you, darlin'. She's been asleep all your life but now she needs to get out."

Maddy used his deep voice and his warmth to steady herself. *No matter what happens, Jake will be here to help you*, she told herself. *So just breathe, girl. Just breathe and let it go...*

The change was sudden and complete and it didn't hurt a bit. One minute she was standing on two feet and the next she was feeling the cold concrete under four instead. If Maddy had to describe the sensation she would say it must be what water feels like being suddenly poured from one container into another. The outside might look different but what was inside was essentially unchanged.

Maddy opened her eyes and looked at a new world. Everything seemed so much brighter. The woods around the cabin weren't dark and spooky anymore and the moon seemed to shed a supernaturally bright glow over the glistening snow that covered the ground. Also, everything seemed to have a faint bluish tint—as though she were seeing a different light spectrum. Or maybe seeing more deeply into the existing spectrum than she ever had as a human.

She would have liked to think about her new situation more clearly but there were other things drawing her attention. Like all the interesting smells her twitching nose was picking up. New snow that had just fallen in the last hour smelled different from old snow that had fallen the day before, she discovered. And the concrete smelled cold although she'd never thought of cold as a smell before. And the trees smelled alive and green even though they were barren and leafless for the winter.

Behind her was the best smell of all—a masculine scent of warmth and safety mixed with her own feminine musk. The scent of *he-who-is-my-mate*. It was coming from the tall human who was more than human. He was baring his teeth at her in what she might have considered a threatening way except she knew it was a human expression of happiness. She vaguely remembered having the same expression on her own face but it seemed unimportant now.

*He-who-is-my-mate* was saying something in a deep, rumbling voice but Maddy didn't really understand the words. His meaning, however, was loud and clear. He was proud of her, the rumbling bass tone said. Proud and happy to be near her. Maddy felt the same way about him. Turning around, she pressed her head against the side of his bare leg, scent-marking him as her own, and was rewarded with a warm hand scratching her newly sensitive ears.

There were other smells too. The smell of *he-who-could-be-a-mate* was coming strongly from the male lynx standing in the soft snow, watching her and the human. A

good smell, almost as good as the man who was still stroking her head. Almost but not quite.

Then *he-who-is-my-mate* stepped away for a moment and when Maddy looked for him again, there was a huge black wolf in his place. Surprised, she jumped high in the air...and found herself among the branches of an old oak tree that grew close to the porch. It was a leap she never could have made in her old, human form—a fact that registered in her animal brain with vague satisfaction.

The huge wolf looked up at her, perched high in the snowy branches, and whined appealingly. *Down*, Maddy caught from him in a soft, pleading tone. *Won't hurt you*. She looked at him uncertainly but then, under the new, wild-wolf smell she caught the scent of *he-who-is-my-mate*.

*Jake!* The strange human name word popped into her head as if from nowhere. It seemed familiar to Maddy—a word that meant safety and caring and protection and warmth. Making an instant decision, she sprang from the tree branch where she was perched and landed noiselessly on the snow-covered ground.

*Safe?* She approached the big wolf cautiously. Some instinct was telling her to be careful because they were both predators and he wasn't her kind. But a deeper instinct, one she trusted implicitly, let her know that the wolf would never hurt her.

*Safe.* The wolf whined softly again and dipped its head to nuzzle the side of Maddy's face. She felt her long, sensitive whiskers bristle and then she returned the caress, rubbing her furry cheek against the wolf's long muzzle, marking him all over again as her own. He might be a different species but he was still *he-who-is-my-mate*.

As she scent-marked her mate she felt rather than saw the male lynx who had been standing silently during her exchange with the wolf come sidling up beside her. Maddy turned on him, bristling when he got too close.

*My mate! My space! Keep away.*

*Friend*, he sent back firmly and the wolf gave a sharp bark of agreement.

*Friend!*

Reluctantly, Maddy allowed the male lynx to smell her but she drew back with a hiss and raised one paw in warning when he tried to sniff between her hind legs.

*Friend – not mate!* she sent and the male lynx backed off reluctantly.

But the wolf nudged her toward the other male with his nose. *Your kind*, he sent and punctuated the statement with a staccato bark. *Not me – him. Your kind.*

Maddy nuzzled the wolf's shoulder, keeping a wary eye on the other lynx. She didn't care that the wolf was a different kind of predator—he was still her mate. And she wasn't interested in mating with another no matter how good or tempting he smelled.

Suddenly there was a faint crackling far off in the woods. It was a sound she never would have heard as a human but to her new lynx ears, it was incredibly loud. It was clear her companions had heard it too because the male lynx was crouched, his short,

stubby tail twitching with suppressed excitement. The wolf had his head cocked to one side and his ears pricked up in complete attention.

*Prey!*

Maddy wasn't sure which of them had first thought it but the word came with exciting mental images of lithe deer bounding over the soft snow, hot blood pounding through their delicious meaty bodies. Bodies that could be bitten and savored until every last bone was licked clean and your belly was full. Maddy had a vague idea that she hadn't been hungry before her change but now she was suddenly starving and the idea of fresh, hot, bloody meat sounded wonderful. In fact, once the idea entered her brain it was all she could think about.

*Prey, must get prey!* She would have bounded eagerly forward but the wolf blocked her path.

*Wait. Slowly... He-who-is-my-mate* took the lead and the male lynx came behind her, being careful not to get his face too close to her tail. Maddy went between them, running lightly over the snow, thoroughly enjoying the first hunt of her life...

\* \* \* \* \*

"God, I'm freezing to death!" Maddy stamped the snow off her bare feet and rubbed her arms frantically to keep warm.

"I told you changing takes a lot of heat and energy," Jake said as he morphed from the huge black wolf back into his normal human shape.

"A hell of a lot," Will agreed as he changed as well.

"C'mon—let's go inside and get warm." Jake led the way through the front door of the cabin impatiently.

The shift from lynx to human hadn't been quite as effortless as the shift from human to lynx, Maddy thought as she followed him to the door. She'd been enjoying herself so much she hadn't wanted to change back. Her human self couldn't see or hear or smell as well as her cat self. She couldn't run fast and catch prey and fill her belly with their hot, delicious meat. Why would she want to go back to being a weak, uninteresting creature who couldn't hunt? At least, that was how her alter ego, the female lynx, had been reasoning when she'd almost decided not to change back.

Jake had to point out that they needed to change forms if she wanted him to breed her again before she agreed to go back to the boring, limited form. And even now she felt clumsy and uncertain, as though she was just learning to walk on two feet again. Her eyes felt weak, almost as if she was suddenly nearsighted, and her nose and ears seemed stuffed up, reminding Maddy of having a bad cold.

Cold and weary, she stumbled and nearly tripped on the lintel of the door as she followed Jake's broad, bare back.

Will caught her with one hand. "Sucks to be human again, doesn't it?" he asked, flashing her a rueful grin.

Maddy tried to ignore the spark of electricity she felt coursing through her at his touch. "Um...yeah. I feel like I have a cold or something. I can't smell anything now."

"You'll get used to your dull human senses again in a minute. It's just hard at first," he promised.

"Will I get used to freezing to death? I swear I was nowhere near this cold before the change. But now..." Maddy trailed off, her teeth chattering. In fact, she did seem to be getting colder the longer she was in her human form. It was as though all the energy she had used up as a lynx was still draining out of her, leaving her unable to warm up despite being in the heated cabin.

"You okay?" Will looked at her anxiously.

"F-f-fine," Maddy managed to stammer even though it was a lie. "J-just a l-l-little c-cold." She stumbled again and he leaned over and picked her up despite her halfhearted protests.

"Jake, you got the bath ready yet?" he called down the hall, anxiety thick in his voice.

"It's filling right now." Jake came into view, still naked and frowning. "Is everything okay?"

"It's Maddy—she seems to be going into shock." The look on Will's face was beyond worried. "We need to warm her up—now!"

"Quick, in front of the fire." Jake gestured to the large fireplace set in the wall and motioned for Will to set Maddy down.

"It's almost out." Will frowned at the dull red embers in the hearth that barely glowed as he set Maddy on her feet, still supporting her with an arm around her waist. "Are you sure the bath's not ready yet?"

"Only a few inches in the tub and she needs full immersion to get her core temperature back up." Jake cursed under his breath. "I should've known we were spending too much time in our animal forms for a new shifter. Here." He pressed himself tight against Maddy's bare back and threw his arms around Will. "Body heat—it's the only way."

Will seemed to understand at once. He pressed close to Maddy's front, smashing her breasts against his broad, bare chest, and put his arms around her and Jake. "I hope this works," Maddy heard him tell the other man. "She's trembling like a leaf."

"Hang in there, darlin'," Jake rumbled, his deep voice vibrating her body. "Just hang in there a little longer until the bath fills up and then we'll get you nice and warm."

Maddy closed her eyes and tried to do as he said. Now she saw the necessity of the huge hot-tub type bathtub she'd wondered about before. Apparently changing forms between human and animal and back again gave you a huge heat and energy debt to repay. And not even the steak dinner she'd had as a human or the deer she and Jake



and Will had killed and eaten while they were in their animal forms had offset it. She felt cold and hungry and tired and...

*And hot*, a small mental voice supplied. Not in the physical sense—on the outside she was still shivering with cold, Maddy realized. But on the inside, she could feel the closed loop of electricity flowing between her skin and Jake's and Will's bare bodies as they pressed tightly against her. The warm, intimate contact started a fire inside her and an ache between her thighs that was too close to the extreme desire she'd felt during her heat to be comfortable.

"Fine...I'm fine," she tried to tell them but her voice was too faint and she was pressed too tightly against Will's chest to make them understand.

*God, please stop! Can't do this again...don't want to feel this way!* she thought incoherently as the heat between her thighs increased. Her nipples were tight little points against the broad, muscular planes of Will's chest and her pussy was beginning to feel swollen and slippery. God, what if when they let her go it was obvious how turned on she was getting? If one of them even happened to glance between her legs they'd be able to see how wet she was because she was sure her juices were coating her thighs by now.

"Please," she moaned and finally Jake heard her.

"You all right, darlin'?" he asked, anxiously in her ear. "Feeling better?"

"No...yes...please just let me go!" Maddy felt completely surrounded by hard male bodies but at last her feeble attempts to struggle got through to Jake and Will.

"I think she wants us to ease up, Jake." Will took a step back, still supporting her with one arm. Even now he was close enough that Maddy could smell his warm, leather and musk scent and feel his body heat against her skin but at least she wasn't pressed up against him anymore. Behind her, Jake was still holding her close with his front to her back. His dark, spicy male scent seemed to mix with Will's to make a more powerful aroma—something that was so delicious and forbidden it made Maddy's head spin just to smell it.

"What's wrong, Maddy?" he asked, stroking her tangled hair soothingly. "Did we upset you?"

"Aroused her is more like it," Will muttered under his breath. Leaning down, he pressed his face to the sensitive skin of Maddy's neck and inhaled. "Jake, she's in heat again."

"I am not!" Maddy protested, pushing him away—or trying to anyway. He was too strong and she got the idea he only moved his head because she wanted him to. Suddenly she wasn't cold anymore. She could feel her entire body heating with a warm, sexual flush that seemed to spread all over her fair skin like a stain.

"Yes, you are, darlin'. Or close to it, anyway." Jake stepped around and looked at her, frowning. "I should have thought that the both of us together would set her off again," he said to Will in an undertone. "Too damn many pheromones floating around."

"I'm sorry—I can't help it!" Maddy crossed her arms over her bare breasts protectively and backed away from them. Will's eyes were pale green again and Jake's were gold—plainly they were catching Maddy's scent as much as she was catching theirs.

"It's okay, darlin'—you know I won't hurt you." Jake took a step toward her and Maddy forced herself to hold her ground. "Just need to breed you again."

"But the scent...you said if the...the elders smelled you on me—" Maddy began.

"You're right. The elders and the others will be here tomorrow morning at the latest." Jake looked frustrated. "God, darlin', but I don't want to see you in pain..."

Maddy gasped softly as a wave of need-lust-pain-desire washed through her. No doubt about it—she really was having another relapse. She didn't want Jake to risk putting too much of his scent on her so close to their meeting with the elders but on the other hand she needed something...anything just to take the edge off.

Jake was looking at her intently and he seemed almost to be able to read her mind. "You just need something to take the edge off, darlin'," he said, his words echoing her thoughts so exactly that Maddy stared at him in surprise. "If only..." He glanced at Will quickly and then looked back at her. "Maddy, would you consider letting Will help you—if I was involved too?"

"I...don't know." Maddy looked uncertainly at the other male shifter, who was standing quietly and staring back at her. "What...what exactly would he do?"

"She's too far gone for a manual orgasm to help her much," Jake said, talking to himself instead of her. He looked up. "Maybe if Will went down on you..."

Maddy felt a wave of embarrassment swamp her at the thought. "I don't know, Jake. What if...I mean I don't think all guys like to do that the way you do."

Jake looked at Will, one black eyebrow arched in question. "Will?"

Maddy turned her head to see that Will was closer than he had been and his pale green eyes were blazing. "You want to know if I want to eat your pussy, sweetheart?" he asked in a soft, growling voice.

"I...I..." But before she could get another word out of her mouth Will had dropped to his knees before her and was spreading her thighs. Maddy reached for him, to stop him, but he was too quick. Her hands hadn't even reached his hair before she felt his hot tongue pressing between her thighs, parting her swollen pussy lips with a long, slow, leisurely sweep that left her breathless.

Will looked up, his mouth shiny with her juices. "Does that answer your question?"

Biting her lower lip, Maddy nodded. Then she looked at Jake. "You...you think it will help if Will makes me come with...with his tongue?"

He shrugged his powerful shoulders. "Can't hurt, darlin'. It might take care of your heat or it might not—we'll see."

"But you'll stay with me?" she couldn't help asking.

He nodded firmly. "I'll be with you—both of you—every step of the way," he promised, including Will in his words.

Will nodded and got to his feet. "That's the way it ought to be, sweetheart," he told Maddy. "I know you're bonded to Jake and it's hard to let another male near you. But if he's touching you at the same time it should make things easier."

"All right." Maddy gasped softly as another wave of need hit her. "Let's...can we at least go into the bedroom?"

Will looked thoughtful "I have a better idea. Why don't we take that bath after all? We can do what needs to be done in the tub."

"Good idea. It's probably about to run over anyway." Jake nodded and looked at Maddy. "Darlin'?"

She was flooded with uncertainty and need. As much as she'd tried to deny it, the desire had been building within her until her whole body felt like a dam about to burst from too much pressure. She needed something now. Needed to feel a thick cock pounding inside her, fucking her and filling her with hot cum... *No, I can't have that*, she reminded herself, trying to push the image away. *Jake can't give me that right now so I'll have to be satisfied with what Will's going to do*. She had a brief, embarrassing flash of the muscular male shifter kneeling before her, his head between her thighs as he lapped her cunt, but she tried not to dwell on it. "Yes," she heard herself say. "I-I guess that's all right with me."

Will's eyes were blazing with lust but his words were quiet and restrained. "Okay, let's go."

"All right." Jake lifted her in his arms and carried her down the hall as he had the night before. Only this time Maddy knew she would be doing a lot more than sleeping. She still felt embarrassed and conflicted about what she'd agreed to but with the need burning inside her, she didn't know what else she could possibly do.

The tub was about three-quarters full and when the three of them climbed in—very carefully—the water reached the rim of the tub. Maddy was submerged to the undersides of her breasts and she couldn't help the sigh of contentment that left her lips as the steaming water closed around her body. She felt tired, as though she'd expended a great deal of energy tonight—which she guessed she had. If it hadn't been for the insistent pull of her heat she would have been happy to curl up in bed and sleep for the next twenty-four hours.

Jake seemed to understand her fatigue because he settled at one end of the huge tub and pulled her against his chest. "Just relax a minute, darlin'. Let the water warm you up."

"Feels good," Maddy murmured drowsily.

"And it's about to feel even better—I hope." Will gave her an unreadable look from eyes that looked half human and half animal. "May I have permission to touch you, Maddy?"

Maddy bit her lower lip, feeling heat stain her cheeks. But really, this was what they were here for, wasn't it? At least Will had the manners to ask if he could give her what her body so desperately needed instead of just taking. She nodded and then, realizing he was waiting for her to say it out loud, she murmured her assent.

"Thank you." Will moved closer in the warm water until Maddy felt sandwiched between the two men with Will's hard body in front of her and Jake's behind her. For a moment her mind tried to show her a picture of what could be, of both men inside her, moving as one...but she wasn't ready to think of anything like that. And besides, Will was already touching her, distracting her from anything that was going on in the present.

"First I need to open you," he told her, and his long fingers did exactly that under the water.

Maddy gasped as he parted her pussy lips and the heated water rushed into her core. It felt so good but at the same time, the new sensation only fed her need, made it worse. Will seemed to know that because he stroked her sensitive clit gently with the pad of his thumb and looked into her eyes as he spoke.

"Your pleasure is mine, Maddy. Are you willing to receive my tongue here?"

She wasn't sure if this was another shifter ceremony or if Will just liked to have permission before he proceeded but she nodded and then said, "Yes," softly in case he needed to hear her answer.

Jake murmured approvingly behind her and she pressed her back to his solid front as Will continued to touch her.

"And here as well?" Will asked, still looking at her intently.

Maddy moaned as two long fingers stroked into her, filling her slippery channel. "Yes," she managed to make herself say though the word came out as more of a gasp. "Yes, please..."

Desire was burning in Will's intense gaze. "Support her," he told Jake as he withdrew his fingers. To Maddy he said, "I have to taste you now, sweetheart—can't wait any longer."

She moaned her assent and then she was floating, Jake supporting her top half with her head against his shoulder and his strong arms holding her up while Will supported her lower half, cupping her buttocks as he brought her pelvis up to his mouth.

"You have a beautiful pussy, sweetheart," he murmured hoarsely, taking a moment to look at her, just as Jake had. "So soft and wet and pink." His hands tightened on her ass and hips and then he dipped his head and kissed her reverently, almost as though he was kissing her mouth.

Maddy gasped breathlessly, hardly able to believe this was happening. Was she really floating in the hot water as Will and Jake held her between them? Was she really allowing the other shifter to eat her pussy even though she barely knew him?

"It's all right, darlin'." Jake seemed to sense her uncertainty and his deep voice rumbling in her ear made Maddy feel more at ease.

"I just...can't believe I'm doing this," she whispered.

"This is what you need." He sounded absolutely certain. "There's no shame in getting what you need, Maddy. So just open up and let Will eat your sweet pussy. He needs to put his tongue inside you almost as bad as you need to feel it there—needs to taste your cunt honey."

"He...he does?" Maddy asked, looking down in wonder to where Will was still kissing her gently.

"Mm-hmm," Jake rumbled in her ear. "The scent of a female in heat will make any male ready to fuck. But it's especially potent when the female is of your own tribe. You could say Will's been wanting you from the moment he walked in on us breeding last night."

"He's right." Will looked up from the long, slow kiss he'd been performing between her legs. "I won't do anything you don't want me to, Maddy. But I can't deny I want you."

Maddy felt the blush heat her cheeks again. "I...understand," she murmured, uncertain of what else to say. She was already opening her legs for his tongue and fingers—what else could he want? *You know what he wants—what he needs*, whispered a traitorous little voice in her head but Maddy refused to listen. Instead she reached out and brushed her hand over Will's cheek.

Will leaned forward and kissed her fingertips lightly. Then, his eyes never leaving hers, he bent his head again and laid another gentle kiss directly over her swollen, aching clit. The touch was featherlight but it ignited her blood in a way she couldn't explain and Maddy had to bite her bottom lip to keep from crying out.

"Feel good, darlin'?" Jake murmured to her as Will repeated the kiss and then sucked her clit into his mouth and began a slow swirl with his tongue.

"Feels very good," Maddy admitted, though trying to sound coherent while Will was subjecting the little pink pearl between her legs to such sweet torture was difficult. "He's...very good at this."

Jake laughed softly. "I told you shifter males like to eat pussy."

"More than other men? Human men?" Maddy almost moaned as Will's tongue moved lower, penetrating her entrance and sending hot flashes racing down her spine.

Jake kissed her cheek gently. "Hell yeah, because it's more intense for us. The smell...the taste...nothing can compare to the scent and flavor of a female in heat. That and nothing makes a female hotter, faster. Makes her ready to have your cock deep inside her pussy, filling her with your cum."

"God!" Maddy bucked up to meet Will's mouth as he moved back to her swollen clit. She could feel the pleasure building inside her already, the rising tide that had become so very familiar over the last forty-eight hours. It still amazed her that she was

able to have an orgasm at all, let alone that she could relax enough to let a man she barely knew give her one. But her body seemed to know what she needed and there was no arguing with her newly discovered biology.

“Just let go,” Jake murmured in her ear, plucking gently at her nipples to heighten the pleasure growing inside her. “Let yourself go and let Will make you come, darlin’.”

As he spoke, Will pressed his tongue deep inside her again while he stroked the side of her clit with his thumb. Fireworks of sensation suddenly exploded inside her and Maddy moaned out loud as her orgasm overwhelmed her. She was dimly aware that she was moving against Will’s mouth and that her thrashing and bucking was splashing water out of the tub but she couldn’t help herself. It was just too much—the sound of Jake’s voice in her ear and the feel of Will’s mouth on her cunt, of him tongue-fucking her until she couldn’t breathe. She felt like she was exploding from the inside out. And it was good...so incredibly good.

The only problem was, it wasn’t enough.

## Chapter Eleven

"God," Maddy gasped as the pleasure finally ebbed and Will reluctantly stopped tasting her. "That was...that felt..."

"Good, I hope." He smiled at her, his eyes filled with lust.

"Amazing is the word she's looking for, I think." Jake sounded amused. If he was jealous of what had just passed between Maddy and Will, he certainly didn't show it.

"It *was* amazing," she hastened to let Will know. What she *didn't* want him or Jake to know was that the aching need-lust-desire-heat was still with her. That it was, in fact, stronger than ever. *I can deal with this*, she told herself grimly as Will released her and she settled back into the warm water. *I can't get Jake in trouble by asking him to breed me again so close to the meeting with the elders so I have to get over it myself.*

As for why she didn't want to ask Will for further help, the answer was too frightening to think about. It was better—safer—to try to ignore the aching need and maybe after she'd soaked awhile in the tub it would go away on its own.

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself, Maddy," Will said softly, looking her in the eyes. "I'm honored that you let me help you." He held her gaze for so long that Maddy blushed and looked away.

"Thank you," she murmured, pressing her head against Jake's broad shoulder. "It...it was very kind of you."

"It was my pleasure," he assured her, his voice deep with need.

"I'm just glad the two of you are getting along a little better." Jake kissed her forehead gently and then her mouth. It was as though he was asserting his possession of her without actually saying a word. Maddy wanted to tell him he still had her heart, no matter how intense the orgasm Will had given her was, but she couldn't seem to find the words.

*His kiss...his nearness makes it worse*, she thought as Jake took her mouth. And it was true—the needling between her legs was only getting more intense. But having his lips on hers was such a sweet sensation that she couldn't break away, even when the aching in her sex became a sharp, insistent pain.

"Think I'll go make the bed." Will's voice broke through the haze of desire that had surrounded her and Maddy finally pulled away from Jake.

"Will, I'm sorry—" she began but he raised a hand to stop her.

"Don't worry about it—Jake has prior claim and I don't blame him for asserting it. No matter how good your friendship, it's not easy to see your best friend pleasure your female."

"Not easy but necessary," Jake said quietly. "Thank you for helping her, Will. It means a lot to me."

"To me too," Will said seriously. "But I think you two deserve a minute alone. I'll go get the bed ready." Nodding at both of them, he climbed out of the tub and grabbed a towel to wrap around his lean hips before padding out of the bathroom.

Maddy looked at Jake. "Did we hurt him? Kissing like that?"

Jake shook his head. "No, darlin'. He knows the score—he was here second. That doesn't mean he doesn't want you, just that he defers to my claim. At least for right now. When the council comes..."

"They'll give him first claim on me," Maddy said since he seemed unwilling to finish his sentence. But to her surprise, Jake shook his head.

"No. They'll make you choose a male Lynx for your mate but that doesn't mean you have to pick Will." He looked at her seriously. "I wish you would though. That way I wouldn't have to worry about you being treated right."

"I-I don't know what I'll do." Maddy looked down at the surface of the cooling water, feeling miserable. Jake was still the only one she wanted as a mate. No matter what incredible pleasures Will gave her, Jake was still first in her heart. Then her worries were swept away by another stab of painful need.

This one was too strong to disguise. Maddy gasped and put her arms around herself, her eyes squeezed shut as she tried to ignore the desire and lust that burned through her. When she opened them again, Jake was frowning at her.

"The orgasm Will gave you wasn't enough." It wasn't a question and she knew there was nothing she could say that would dissuade him. Instead she nodded and hung her head, ashamed of her insatiable need.

"I-I'm sorry," she almost whispered, shivering as the cooling water lapped her skin. "I tried not to... I wanted to ignore it this time. I thought it might pass."

"It won't pass until you're bred, darlin'. You ought to know that by now," Jake said severely.

"I know." Maddy nodded. "But I...I didn't want to get you in more trouble than you're already in. And I didn't know how I felt about...about asking Will to...to..."

"To fuck you," Jake finished for her matter-of-factly. "Look at me, Maddy," he continued, raising her chin with one finger so that their eyes met. "I told you what happened to me in the past. I care too much about you to see you in pain. And if the only way to ease that pain is to let Will fuck you, I'll do it in a heartbeat."

"What if I don't want him to?" Maddy burst out passionately. "Will is wonderful but he's not you, Jake. I'm glad it doesn't bother you to think of letting him...letting him breed me. But it bothers me—a *lot*."

Jake looked thoughtful. "Sorry, darlin'. I should have realized that. The bond you have with me is still too strong to let you want another male right away."



"I don't want one *ever*. Oh Jake. This whole taboo thing—it just seems so unfair." Maddy felt tears stinging her eyes and blinked them back.

"I know, darlin'. I know." He kissed her gently on the mouth and Maddy kissed him back desperately, though it made her needing worse. He pulled away at last, looking thoughtful. "What you need to ease your heat is to have your pussy filled with cum. If only there was a way..."

"To fill me with your cum without leaving your scent on me?" Maddy asked. But Jake shook his head.

"No, I was going to say if only there was a way to fill you with cum without the fucking. That's what you really object to, isn't it—letting Will fuck you?"

"I-I guess so," Maddy said doubtfully. "But if you're thinking of asking him to just put himself inside me and...and come without actually..."

"Without actually fucking you." Jake nodded. "That would probably solve the problem."

"But that's...I mean, do you think he'd agree? It seems sort of insulting." Maddy bit her lower lip as another wave of needing shot through her.

"I'm not insulted," said a deep voice from the doorway.

She looked up to see Will standing there naked, his arms crossed over his broad chest, looking at her seriously.

"Oh Will, I'm so sorry." She pulled herself out of the tub and reached for a dark green towel before taking a step toward him. Her eyes flicked involuntarily between his legs and saw that he was hard and ready for her, making her wonder how long he'd been listening to her and Jake talk.

"Don't be." He shook his head. "As I said, I know the bond between you and Jake is strong—I understand if you want help with your heat with no strings attached. I'm not just here as an available male Lynx, Maddy, I'm here as Jake's friend too. And I'll do whatever I can for both of you in that capacity."

"You're a good friend, Will. The best." Jake was out of the tub now too and wrapping himself in a towel. "Do you think you could just come inside Maddy and ease her heat without actually fucking her?"

"I think it can be arranged." Will looked at her. "Is that what you want, sweetheart?"

Another sharp pain went through her, bringing a soft gasp to her lips. "Yes." Maddy nodded, looking up at him, her arms wrapped around herself. "Yes, if you don't mind, Will."

"Mind putting my cock deep inside you and filling you full of my cum?" He gave her that mocking, irreverent grin she was beginning to think hid his true emotions. "Oh I think I can manage that."

"And I'll be with you every step of the way," Jake promised her, leaning down to kiss her cheek briefly. "I'll hold you steady while Will does what needs to be done, darlin'. I won't leave you until you're better."

"Thank you. Both of you." Maddy looked at them, Jake so dark and wild and Will so handsome and mocking, and felt her heart surge with emotion even as her body made its demands known once more. "Thank you, I—" But the desire was reaching an unbearable pitch inside her and she ended her sentence with a gasp.

"No time to lose." Jake gathered her into his arms and headed for the bedroom. Maddy reflected, as well as she could through the pain, that if he and Will kept carrying her everywhere she was going to forget how to walk. Not that she minded. It was warm and comforting in Jake's strong arms and breathing his spicy scent made her feel safe.

He settled on the big bed, his back against the pillows with Maddy in his lap. Then he shed his towel and helped her out of hers. "On your knees, darlin'," he murmured when he had her naked. "Put your arms around me and hold on."

Maddy did as he said, putting her arms around his waist and her head against her chest while she settled the rest of her weight on her knees. She could feel Will right behind her, his big body hot and hard and aching for hers and for a moment she felt guilty for asking him to ease her pain without taking any pleasure in the act himself. But it was still Jake she wanted, Jake she cared for. And if it hadn't been for the damn shifter taboo, it would be Jake who was getting ready to fuck her.

Jake seemed to sense her apprehension. "It's all right, darlin'," he murmured, stroking her damp hair away from her forehead and kissing her gently. "Just spread your legs and let Will slide his cock inside your pussy. This won't be much different from him marking you earlier."

"Except I'll be able to get my cum deeper inside you," Will said from behind her. "Which is a good thing, believe me."

"I do. I know," Maddy murmured through trembling lips. She liked Will, she really did. But it still made her feel strangely vulnerable to spread her legs wide and let him fill her pussy with his cock and his cum.

Her body didn't seem to share her uncertainty, however. She could feel how wet and ready her pussy was and the need was thrumming inside her, like the regular beat of a drum—an aching desire that could only be satiated by one thing.

"Just going to come in you, sweetheart. Not going to fuck you," Will promised her and she became aware that he was fisting himself, getting himself right to the edge in order to keep his promise. In the meantime, Jake was stroking her breasts again as he kissed her, murmuring reassurances that Will would be quick and careful, that she should just relax and let the other man fill her.

Maddy looked up at Jake uncertainly as she felt the hot, blunt probe of Will's cock sliding against her inner folds and teasing her clit. "And...and this really doesn't bother you? Watching another man come in me?"

"Of course it does—at least some." He kissed her again, a little more roughly this time as the head of Will's cock breached the entrance to her pussy. "But I told you—I'd rather watch him fill your pussy with his cock and cum deep inside you than see you in pain, darlin'." He kissed her again. "Is he in you yet?"

Maddy moaned softly. "He's...he's sliding in slowly," she admitted in a whisper. "God, Jake, he's really big."

Jake nodded and stroked her hair reassuringly. "Will's a thick sonuvabitch. Just relax, Maddy. You took me in your pussy, I know you can take him too."

"Trying to take things easy," Will told her, obviously having heard her whispered conversation with Jake. "Don't want to hurt you, sweetheart."

"All...all right," Maddy answered, though her mouth was suddenly so dry she could barely get the words out at all.

"It's okay, darlin'," Jake reassured her again. "Just lean against me and open yourself up as wide as you can. Let Will get all the way into your pussy before he comes. The deeper, the better."

Maddy pressed her face against his broad chest and breathed in his spicy scent, trying to do as he said. Will's shaft seemed to go on and on, stretching her mercilessly as each thick inch slid slowly into her pussy. At last, however, she felt the broad head press against the end of her channel. *That's it*, she thought in relief. *It's all in me now. Finally all in.*

But she was wrong.

Just as she felt she was filled to the limit and could take no more, there was a slight stinging sensation at the entrance to her channel. It wasn't really painful, more unexpected. And the sensation was strange—as though a part of Will's anatomy had suddenly connected and joined to a part of her own. But how was that possible?

She gasped, looking up at Jake with wide eyes. "It's...it stings. Or it did. What...how...?"

"The barb." Jake kissed her soothingly. "Remember I told you Lynx makes have one? Well it doesn't extend until they start to slide their cock into a female. But once it does, it's like my knot—it gives enough to let the male thrust but it won't disengage completely until Will pumps you full of cum."

Maddy bit her lower lip uncertainly. She'd completely forgotten about the barb and was somewhat grateful she hadn't seen it when she was studying Will naked earlier. Not that she'd had much time to really examine him but still—if she'd remembered that he had the barb at the base of his cock she didn't know how she could have stood to have him in her. As it was, though, the barb felt strangely...right somehow inside her. As though her body recognized Will's in a way it never had another male's before—not even Jake's.

"Feels all right?" Will asked anxiously, stroking her hips and ass to let her know he was concerned. "Sorry I didn't warn you about the barb—I thought Jake had already told you about it."

"He did." Maddy inhaled deeply, trying to catch her breath. "I just...I guess I forgot."

"You'll be all right," Jake reassured her. "Just have to let Will stay inside you awhile after he comes, that's all. And I'll hold you the whole time, I promise."

"All right." Maddy nodded, drawing strength from his certainty and the big, warm hands cupping her breasts and twisting her nipples. "I'll be okay."

"Good girl," Jake rumbled approvingly. "Such a good girl to let Will come in you. I love you, Maddy. You know that?"

"I love you too," she whispered, pressing against him. Then she looked back at Will, who was still holding still with his thick shaft buried to the hilt in her pussy. "Uh...Will?"

He shook his head slightly. "Sorry, Maddy. I know you're waiting but I can't quite...I need a little, uh, stimulation if I'm going to come."

"Oh." Maddy felt uncertain. He'd promised not to move in her, not to fuck her, but now it seemed that without some friction he wasn't going to be able to come after all. What could she do?

"Squeeze Will's cock with your pussy, darlin'," Jake murmured in her ear encouragingly. "Milk him with your cunt. *Make* him come."

Maddy did as he said, grateful for the daily Kegel exercises she did as a part of her regular exercise routine. Slowly, deliberately, she tightened and loosened herself around the thick shaft invading her pussy. It was almost as though she was giving Will a massage, she thought as she worked on him. A very intimate massage but still...

"God, sweetheart." Will's deep voice was hoarse, letting her know she was doing a good job. "Just a little more—I'm almost there."

Maddy wasn't sure how much more she could do. But Jake leaned forward and murmured in her ear. "Work yourself on him, darlin'. A little in-and-out action should push him over."

She started to protest but then she realized what he was saying made sense. After all, it wouldn't be like Will was fucking her if she was the one doing the moving. And really, it wouldn't be fucking at all, not if she only let him slide a few inches in and out of her open pussy.

Slowly, tentatively, she tried pulling away. She wasn't sure if the barb inside her would allow it, but it seemed to disengage partially, enough for her to slide an inch or two of Will's cock out of her pussy and then press backward to take it inside herself again.

Maddy moaned and Will made a slightly strangled sound as they came together. She could feel his big body as tight as a wire behind her and sensed that he was using every ounce of his self-control to hold himself back from grabbing her hips and pounding into her. Just the thought of that, the thought of her being in control of the situation instead of the other way around, gave her a surge of confidence and pleasure.

She pulled away again, this time letting more of his thick shaft slip out of her pussy before pressing back to take it to the hilt inside her once more.

Somehow she established a kind of rhythm, with Will holding rigidly still behind her and Jake telling her how beautiful and brave she was, working herself on Will's cock. "That's right, darlin', take him deep," he encouraged her as he stroked and pinched her nipples and kissed her neck and face. "Fuck yourself on Will's cock, get him deep inside that sweet little pussy so he can fill you with his cum."

Maddy didn't know how close Will was to orgasm but the sensation of his thick cock sliding in and out of her pussy and the hot, dirty things Jake was whispering in her ear were slowly but surely pushing her over the edge. She moaned breathlessly as she pressed back against the Lynx shifter once more, fucking herself on him hard, taking him as deep as she could.

"Will..." she gasped. "Jake! God, I'm...I can't help it. I think I'm coming."

"Me too, sweetheart." At last Will took the initiative, grabbing her hips and pressing inside with one hard, swift stroke. "Need to fill you up, Maddy. Need to come deep in your pussy."

"Yes, come in me. Please!" Maddy begged shamelessly. It no longer mattered to her that she was pressed against the chest of one man while another impaled her on his cock. She only knew what her body needed and what it needed right now was to be filled with Will's thick shaft as his hot cum splashed inside her, finally easing the ache she'd been feeling for so long.

"Good girl," Jake murmured again, crushing her to him. "Take it all, Maddy. Just open up and let Will pump his cum deep in your pussy."

Maddy did as he said—there was no way she could do otherwise. And as she felt the heated cum filling her pussy there was a slight tingling sensation again and she knew Will's barb was locked in place even more securely inside her. And this time he wasn't going anywhere until his cum had had plenty of time to soak into her cunt.

With a trembling sigh, she felt her arms and legs give out and Will lowered her to her side. Jake followed them down, lying on his side to face her, concern and love filling his deep gold eyes.

"So beautiful, darlin'," he murmured, sweeping her damp tangle of hair off her forehead. "God, I wish I could've joined you."

Maddy had a brief flash of what that might mean, of having both men buried to the hilt in her body. She had no idea how she could take both of them but at that moment, she wished she could try. "Me too, Jake," she murmured, kissing him as Will's cock continued to fill her pussy. "Me too."

## Chapter Twelve

Maddy wasn't exactly sure when she'd fallen asleep. She only knew that when she woke up it was still dark in the bedroom and the only sound was the soft, regular breathing of the men on either side of her.

She had dim memories of feeling secure and comfortable nestled between the two male shifters, the three of them snuggled together on Jake's big king-size bed after her breeding. Will had stayed inside her for a long time—long enough that Maddy had begun to feel the need to be bred again. She'd been much too tired to repeat her earlier strenuous activity though. So, with encouragement from Jake, she'd allowed Will to do the work the second time around.

Jake had kissed her and reached between her legs to pet her clit while Will stroked slowly and gently inside her pussy. Maddy had given herself up to the sensation of being touched and loved by two men at once, not caring about anything but the overwhelming waves of pleasure that washed over her as she came again and again. And at that moment it had seemed completely and totally right.

Now in the pre-dawn darkness, she felt vaguely ashamed. Hadn't she always been the girl who didn't enjoy sex? But last night she had practically had an orgy and loved every minute of it. Did that make her what one of her foster moms had called "a loose woman"? Or was she normal for a shifter? Jake had warned her that they liked to fuck but it wasn't so much that she *liked* what she'd been doing as that she *had* to do it because her body demanded it.

*Demanded it, huh? Did it demand that you let Will fuck you after all? After the trouble you went to the first time to keep in control of the situation and not let him so much as move an inch inside you? But the second you come and start feeling good it's suddenly all right to let him move as much as he wants, to thrust in and out of your pussy as deep as he can until he comes inside you. Is that it?*

Maddy tried to push the negative thoughts away. It wasn't like she'd *wanted* to let Will breed her. She would have chosen Jake if she could. Of course, if she was being completely honest she had to admit she had enjoyed the feeling of Will moving inside her while Jake kissed her and stroked her. It had felt good and right in a way that was hard to explain or excuse. For a moment she let herself imagine how much better it would feel to have Jake do more than kiss her. To have him actually inside her at the same time as Will...

*What are you thinking? That's crazy and you know it. Both of them are huge as it is—there's no way you could take them both at once. And no way you should even be thinking about it.*

Maddy knew the judgmental little voice in her head was probably right and anyway, it was a moot point since Jake wouldn't be allowed to be with her anymore. *Ever?* she wondered, feeling a hopelessness descend on her. *Will we never be allowed to be together again or are they just going to come punish him and lecture me and then let us get on with our lives?*

It made her upset to realize she had so little control over her own future and she was mad at herself for not asking more questions. Instead of finding out the hard facts she'd been preoccupied with getting her brains screwed out. So now she had almost no idea of what was really going to happen to her once the elders and the representatives of the Lynx and Wolf tribes got there.

"They're here." Jake's low, tense voice interrupted her train of thought and she looked over to see that his eyes were open and glowing pale gold in the dim room.

"They are?" she kept her voice low. "Who's here? How can you tell?" If there was a strange noise outside the window she couldn't hear it. And likewise, if there were new people outside to smell her new sharpened senses weren't picking them up.

"He can tell because he's attuned to his tribe." Will was sitting up on the other side of her, rubbing one hand through his golden brown hair. At the moment it stood up at crazy angles all over his head, almost rivaling Jake's for wildness. *Bed head or is it because his hackles are up?* Maddy wondered. She could feel the hair at the back of her own neck wanting to stand up now that she knew they weren't alone in this part of the woods anymore. But the sudden feeling of paranoia could just be nerves and nothing to do with her shifter nature at all, she reasoned.

Jake barked a short, humorless laugh. "I'm attuned to them all right. Even after all these years I can still feel it when that bastard Rich is here."

"So...who's here? And who is Rich?" Maddy asked, sitting up between them and making sure to keep the sheet modestly over her breasts. Despite being naked with both men several times she was still shy.

"The pack is here," Jake said shortly. He was already getting out of bed. "And Rich is my older half brother – the one I told you about."

*The one who made him fight his fiancé's friend instead of just letting Jake marry her. Or mate her or whatever it is they do.*

Maddy nodded. "Are they the only ones here right now? And where are they?"

"Surrounding the house, no doubt." Will was also up and pulling on his clothes. "And the Lynx tribe is on its way – or part of it, anyway. God, I hope they don't send that asshole Simon to do their talking."

Maddy wanted to ask who Simon was and why Will didn't want to see him but suddenly someone pounded on the front door of the cabin. It was all the way at the other end of the house but it was obvious whoever was knocking wasn't trying to be polite.

Jake frowned at her. "Better get dressed, darlin'. Rich doesn't like to be kept waiting. Not to mention the council of elders."

"But...but..." Maddy looked down at herself uncertainly. "Shouldn't we, I don't know, grab a quick shower?"

Will shook his head. "That would make it seem like we're trying to conceal evidence from the elders. And believe me, sweetheart, no matter how many baths or showers we take, we can't hope to do that. So it's better not to even try."

"Their noses are that sharp?" Maddy asked doubtfully. She was only now getting used to her own enhanced senses – which seemed to be much sharper when she was in her animal form than when she was human. But she couldn't imagine being able to smell someone and tell who they'd slept with recently.

"They have a kind of sixth sense," Jake explained, pulling on a pair of faded jeans. "They *feel* the people in their tribe. It's one of the qualities that got them to where they are in the first place. It takes more than just age to make an elder."

"But nobody would need a sixth sense to tell that Jake's been breeding you. His scent is all over you," Will put in, tucking a pinstriped button-down shirt into a pair of black dress pants. He was looking less like the relaxed GQ model Maddy had first met and more like a lawyer every minute. She wondered if he'd brought the suit with him or if it was a spare he kept at Jake's house for quick changes.

"Unfortunately, Will's right." Jake looked grim as he tossed Maddy her clothes. "I'll just have to tell the elders I had no choice and hope they understand."

"Right, of course." Will nodded but there was no conviction in either man's voice.

Maddy felt a chill go down her spine as she pulled on her clothes. "They *have* to understand. You saved me, Jake! Would they rather me be dead than for you to break one stupid rule?"

Will held up a hand to stop her. "I know it sounds stupid to you, Maddy, but to the tribes it's the most serious infraction a shifter can commit. You could murder someone and get away with it more easily."

"Oh my God." Icy fear sat in her stomach like a meal she couldn't digest. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, he's serious." Jake stooped to give her a quick, one armed hug. "But don't worry, darlin'. We'll manage somehow."

Maddy wanted to ask more questions but whoever was outside was banging again—louder this time—and Will was already on his way to open the door. She only had time to run her fingers through her hair and make sure her sweater was buttoned up before she heard a male voice at the front of the cabin.

"Well, Jake, looks like you fucked up royally this time. Elder Sharptooth says you screwed a Lynx bitch. So where is she?"

"Her name is Maddy and she's under my protection." Jake's voice was a low, menacing growl. "This is still my land no matter what I did—you show respect when you talk about her, Rich."



The other man—who Maddy already disliked even though she hadn't seen his face yet—laughed coarsely. "Sure. We'll see about that once the elders have their say."

His voice seemed to be getting closer and suddenly Maddy decided that she didn't want to meet him here in the bedroom, where such intimate things had happened so recently. Walking quickly, she stepped out into the hall and closed the door behind her.

Jake, Will and another man who had to be Jake's older half brother Rich, were standing around in front of the large fireplace. Rich looked a lot like Jake except that he was shorter and not quite as muscular. In fact, he had kind of a paunch, which surprised Maddy. She'd expected that all shifters must be in top physical condition because Jake and Will were but apparently it wasn't true.

As she stepped into the room with them Rich's nose twitched and he turned to stare at her. "So this is the one, huh?" He looked at her appraisingly, making Maddy feel like a piece of meat in a butcher's case. "Hope she was one hot fuck, little brother, because you're up shit creek without a paddle now."

"I told you, show some goddamned *respect*." Jake took a step forward, glowering at his older brother.

"You want to go right now?" There was a light in Rich's eyes, which were the same pale blue as Jake's. "Wanna see who's the real alpha around here, little brother?"

"No need for that." Will put a restraining hand on Jake's chest, urging him back. He frowned at Rich. "I should advise you that Madeline Grant is under the joint protection of Jake and myself and neither one of us will take an insult to her lightly."

Maddy was surprised—she hadn't known that Will knew her full name. And now that he was in full lawyer mode instead of lounging around the house he seemed much more impressive.

But Rich was obviously indifferent to the implied legal threat. He sneered at Will, his face turning ugly with the expression. "Whatever. You think I'm worried about what either one of you assholes thinks?"

Will regarded him coolly. "Jake might be under your authority—at least nominally—but do you really want to risk a cross-tribal altercation by dragging me into it too? I promise you, I can make trouble for you that will last a hell of a lot longer than a fistfight."

Rich looked vaguely uneasy. "What the hell do you care, Tanner? Any fool with a nose can tell Jake got to her first so she's bonded to him." He turned and looked at Maddy, his nostrils twitching. "Although I can tell you managed to get a piece of the action too. How you got her to open her legs for your dick when she'd already had Jake's is beyond me but I'd bet my last dollar it's him she wants, not you."

*A slut. He's calling me a slut in so many words.* For a moment Maddy felt sick and ashamed. It was true—she'd let both men make love to her even though she cared about Jake more. But then anger burned through her, replacing the shame. How *dare* this asshole who didn't even know her come into Jake's house and start insulting her to her face? Who did he think he was?

Will was physically restraining Jake from taking a swing at Rich now so Maddy stepped forward and addressed him herself.

"It's true, I had sexual relations with both Jake and Will," she said, raising her chin to look Jake's older brother in the eye. "But I'm not ashamed of that and I refuse to let you make me feel bad about my personal choices. What I choose to do with my body is *none of your business*." She emphasized the last four words with a hard poke to Rich's chest, which was covered in a red-and-white plaid lumberjack-type shirt.

Rich stepped back, surprise flaring in his eyes. They weren't like Jake's after all, Maddy decided as she met his surprised stare with a glare of her own. They were smaller and piggy looking with a mean light in their depths that made her think Rich enjoyed the pain of others – both watching it and causing it.

"She's got a mouth on her, huh?" he said, glancing back at Jake who was growling menacingly. "You always did like mouthy women."

Maddy started to tell him if he had something to say about her, he should tell her personally and not pretend she wasn't in the room when she heard the sound of the front door opening again.

"Is this what they call a house out here? Gods, these Wolves. No taste. No taste at *all*." The new voice belonged to a tall man with an expensive haircut and a suit that probably cost as much as Maddy's truck. He walked into Jake's living room, casting disdainful looks at everything around him and picking his steps carefully, as though he was afraid he might step in dog crap if he didn't watch out.

"Just awful, Simon. I quite agree." A stick-thin woman with black hair and a beaky nose was right behind the new arrival. She had on a raw silk white sheath dress that looked like it belonged on a runway in Milan and five-inch-high stiletto heels that must have been as expensive as the man's suit. Maddy wondered how in the world she'd managed to get through the snow in her ridiculous footwear but clearly being fashion forward was more important than being practical to these people – whoever they were.

"Hello, Simon. Nice of you to come," Will said flatly as the tall man looked around Jake's cabin with obvious distaste. "And I see you brought Tamara with you. Wonderful."

"Will, *darling*." The anorexic model teetered toward him and kissed the air beside his cheek.

"Hello, Tamara." Will returned the gesture with a notable lack of enthusiasm.

"What are you *doing* here?" she demanded, widening her eyes, which were a startling shade Mediterranean blue. "Simon and I heard you were involved in this nasty business but we so *hoped* it wasn't true."

"It's true, all right. I came here to help Jake out but unfortunately, I was too late to do what needed to be done." Will looked around until he spotted Maddy, who was watching him and the two perfectly groomed people with mistrust. "Maddy, come here for a minute." He beckoned to her and she came forward reluctantly. "This is Madeline Grant," he said, taking her hand and pulling her a little closer. "And, Maddy, this is

Simon, the Second Cat of our people—that means he's the second in command of the tribe," he explained, obviously seeing Maddy's confused look.

"Yes, sorry you didn't get the First Cat but you know Lawrence—he's always so busy with the casino," Simon put in. "I couldn't pry him away with a crowbar."

"And this Sexy Remy over here is Tamara, Simon's mate." Will nodded at the woman in the white silk sheath.

"Will, you naughty boy. I'm not anorexic—just naturally *slender*." Tamara preened, stroking a hand down her tiny waist and sharply jutting hip bones.

"Hello." Maddy nodded to both of them.

"Maddy here has been raised as a human and until Jake found her, she didn't have any idea she was a shifter," Will told them.

"Well, well, quite the little lost lamb," Simon said a little too heartily. "Or the little lost Lynx as the case may be." He laughed and Maddy thought she'd never heard a more insincere sound in her life.

"Yes, it's a pity you didn't find out about your heritage a little sooner so that a suitable male could've been found for you. However, I suppose it's too late *now*." Tamara looked down her beaky nose at Maddy as though she was something she'd had found on the bottom of her designer shoes.

"It's *not* too late to welcome Maddy into the tribe and teach her about her people," Will said firmly, squeezing her hand. "She's a real find—tough, smart, beautiful..."

"*Tainted*," murmured Tamara, her perfectly made-up lips curling just a little.

"I'm sorry—*what* did you call me?" Maddy had had about enough. Rich's blunt rudeness was easier to deal with than the snide looks she'd been getting from Simon and Tamara from the moment they walked in.

"Tainted, dear. That's what you are, you know." Tamara widened her gorgeous blue-green eyes in mock surprise. "Didn't Will tell you that?"

Maddy turned to Will, frowning. "What is she talking about?"

He looked uncomfortable. "Don't pay any attention—Tamara's just being rude."

"No." Maddy put a hand on her hip. "I want to know what she means."

"What I mean, *honey*, is that you're damaged goods now that you've been fucked by a Wolf." Tamara shuttered delicately. "Really—such poor taste! Though I guess we couldn't expect much more from someone raised among the humans."

Maddy looked at her in disbelief. "Jake saved my life. I'm grateful to him and if I had to do it all again, I'd do the exact same thing—taboo or no taboo."

"Dear me." Simon put a hand to his chest in a rather feminine gesture. "Completely unrepentant, are we? I'm afraid that won't go over well with the Council of Elders."

"Stop it, both of you." Will glared at the two other Lynx shifters and then looked at Maddy. "Don't pay any attention to them, Maddy. They're just being assholes."

Maddy put her arms around herself protectively and cast Jake, who was arguing in lowered tones with his older brother, a longing glance. "I didn't know it would be like this," she murmured to Will. "If this is what the other people in the Lynx tribe are like I don't think I want to know them."

"The feeling is mutual, *sweetie*." Tamara gave her a bright, unfriendly grin. "Unfortunately, none of us has a choice. Simon and I have been sent down here to collect you and bring you back to our tribal grounds so you can pick a mate." She sniffed. "If anyone will have you after they find out what you've done and who you've done it with."

Maddy glared at her. "I'm not going anywhere with you. I'm staying here with Jake."

"Oh don't worry, my dear, your Wolf is coming too." Simon nodded reassuringly. "Our tribe is hosting the Council of Elders for their Winter Solstice this year and he can't be judged and punished until they've seen him. Of course, his pack leader will have to come as well." He gave Rich a distasteful look. "We've never enjoyed having dogs around but I *suppose* we can find a place to put them."

Rich stopped arguing with Jake long enough to growl at Simon, "Watch it, buddy. This dog eats kitty-cats like you for breakfast."

"Well, it would certainly appear you've been eating *something*. And apparently much more of it than is good for you." Tamara eyed Rich's paunch with the red-checked shirt stretched tightly over it. "A word of fashion advice, sweetie—if you want to hide a few extra pounds, wearing a shirt made out of a tablecloth is *not* the way to go."

"You skinny bitch!" Rich growled, taking a menacing step toward him.

Tamara held her ground. "And I'm going to *stay* that way, hon, unlike some people who obviously think it's all right to both eat and *dress* like a lumberjack."

"Enough." Will held out his hands, stopping the argument. He turned to Simon. "You're telling me none of the elders are here—that we all have to go up to the tribal grounds to see them?"

Simon nodded. "Elder Sharptooth of the Wolves and our own Elder Elise are already there. We're still waiting for Elder Roughhide of the Grizzly tribe to show up. But I understand he's on his way—hates flying so he's driving." He shook his head. "Bears are *so* eccentric."

"I don't want to go. It's only five days until Christmas," Maddy objected.

Tamara gave her that innocent, wide-eyed look again. "Got lots of last-minute shopping to do? There's this cute little boutique in the town off our grounds called Applause for Paws that specializes in pet supplies. I'm sure you can find some doggie treats to put in your Wolf's stocking there."

Maddy wanted to hit her. The impulse toward violence was so strong she actually took a step forward before Will restrained her on one side and Jake took her arm on the other.

"Easy, darlin'," he growled in her ear. "That's the Lynx way. They all have big mouths and sharp claws. Will and I went round and round until I realized that when we first met."

Tamara grinned at him charmingly. "I guess you could call us 'catty'."

Will frowned at her. "Try dialing it down a little, would you, Tamara? I don't want Maddy to think she's walking into the lion's den."

"More like a den of snakes," Maddy muttered under her breath and from the flash of the other woman's eyes she knew Tamara had heard her. She turned to Will, not waiting for the sarcastic retort she was sure the female Lynx was formulating. "Do Jake and I have to go?"

Will sighed. "I'm afraid there's no choice, Maddy. Jake has to be seen by the elders and you need to meet the other Lynx males so you can pick a mate."

Maddy opened her mouth to say she didn't *want* a mate but it was obvious it wouldn't do any good. As far as these people—and her own body—was concerned, she had to have a male in her life to breed her at least once a month. She wanted that male to be Jake and she hadn't completely given up on the idea of having him permanently in that capacity. Maybe going to the Lynx tribal grounds was the best way to make it happen. If she could convince the Elders that she was already bound to him—bonded as he'd put it—maybe they'd make an exception. So she only said, "How do we get there? Jake and I were going to drive but it must be at least a five-hundred-mile trip."

"Six hundred," Tamara corrected her sweetly. "Almost six hundred and fifty, actually."

Maddy ignored her. "So do we carpool or what?"

"Carpool?" Simon looked at her as though she'd suggested having group sex in the mud. "Fortunately that *won't* be necessary. We've got a jet and a private airfield to go with it so the trip won't be quite as arduous as you might imagine."

Privately Maddy thought any trip that involved being cooped up in the same vehicle, be it a plane, train or automobile, with the two snotty Lynxes and the surly Rich was going to be hell on earth but she kept it to herself and just nodded again.

"So." Tamara clapped her hands and smiled brightly. "Let's get going—we have to move while the weather is good for flying." She gave Maddy a sweeping glance that somehow made her feel about an inch tall. "And don't worry about packing anything. I'm sure we can find you something *appropriate* to wear once we get to the tribal grounds."

Maddy crossed her arms over her chest. "I want it understood that I need to be back here by Christmas night. I have to work a seven-to-three shift the next day."

"Maddy's a nurse," Jake put in and Maddy could hear the ring of pride in his voice. "A damn good one too."

"A nurse, are you? Well, well, how very Florence Nightingale of you." Simon gave her his insincere smile again. "And here I thought that Will was the only one in our tribe with a human profession."

Will stifled a sigh. "Yes, working for a living isn't very fashionable in the Lynx tribe—which is why I maintain a human practice outside the tribal grounds."

Maddy wondered how they lived if they didn't work but by now she disliked both Simon and Tamara so much she didn't want to talk to them at all—not even to get what might be useful information. Still, she had to be sure she'd be back in time for work so she addressed Simon again. "I need to be back in time to take my shift the day after Christmas. Can you promise me I will be?"

"We'll have the sentencing and mating ceremony on the same day—as soon as Elder Roughhide arrives. And I can't imagine it will take him too much longer to get to us, even if he *is* driving. So yes, you should be back in time to deal with your, um, *job*."

He said "job" as though it was a dirty word that left a bad taste in his mouth and Maddy wondered again what these people did for a living. But there was no time to ask, even if she wanted to. She was already being led out the door into the chilly December morning and into a waiting limo.

It must have rained the night before because the huge drifts she and Jake and Will had played in the night before in their animal forms were mostly melted, leaving muddy expanses of ground around the cabin bare and unprotected looking. Maddy took one last, longing look at the cozy little home that Jake had built, where she had first learned the true meaning of her other nature, before climbing into the long black car and sitting between him and Will.

She had a feeling she was about to find out a lot more about her heritage than she wanted to.

## Chapter Thirteen

The Lynx tribal grounds were located in the foothills of the Adirondacks, not far from a picturesque little town called Schroon in New York State. Getting there wasn't too bad since Maddy rode between Jake and Will all the way, which kept her insulated from both the annoying Lynxes and Jake's abrasive older brother.

Will told her tidbits about the tribe's history on the trip, including the fact that the Lynxes were supposedly an offshoot of the Mohawk Indians, at least as far as the US government knew. While the Bear and Wolf tribes preferred to keep their tribal grounds secluded and private, the Lynx people had set up a casino on theirs which, according to Will, provided the main source of income to almost all the Lynx shifters.

"Of course I'm a half-breed and a Lynx on my mom's side, not my dad's," he said wryly. "Which is why I had to actually go out and work for a living instead of just sitting back and taking my cut from the casino."

"Which is probably why you're not an asshole like the rest of them," Jake muttered as the deluxe SUV that had met them at the private airfield took them into the mountains.

"Hey, those are my people you're talking about," Will protested with mock indignation. "How can you call fine, upstanding specimens like Simon and Tamara assholes?"

Jake shrugged, grinning. "Dunno. Just call 'em like I see 'em I guess."

"Are they all like that?" Maddy asked Will, hoping the answer was no. "I mean, are they all so sarcastic and bitchy and perfectly groomed? Because I'm beginning to think I'm not going to fit in at *all*." *It's going to be like high school all over again – never really belonging anywhere, never really clicking with anyone. No, actually it's going to be worse than high school because everyone is going to despise me for breaking the taboo. I'm walking into a social nightmare.* She shivered at the thought.

Will put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. "I won't lie to you – a lot of them have taken Simon and Tamara's shining example to heart. But there are a few good people, one especially I want you to meet that I think you'll like."

"Great." Maddy sighed, feeling her shoulders slump. "One person who's nice enough to meet and the rest of them are going to treat me like dirt for doing what I had to do to survive."

"I feel like that's my fault, darlin'." Jake sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "This whole mess...if only we could have waited. But there was no way..."

"Of course there was no way you could have waited," Will said sharply. "It was hours after your phone call that I was able to get through. Blame me or blame the snow

but don't blame yourself, Jake. You saved Maddy – don't forget that and don't regret it."

"I *don't* regret it." Jake leaned down and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "I just wish the damn cats wouldn't be so hard on her about it."

Will shook his head. "You and me both, buddy. Maddy, I apologize for my tribe. The First Cat, Lawrence, is too busy counting his pennies and running the casino to rein them in so they pretty much do whatever they want. But I swear they're not all like Simon and Tamara. And I promise I'll do everything in my power to make sure you're treated fairly and with respect."

"Thanks, Will." She tried to smile at him but it was hard with the cold knot of anxiety growing in her gut.

The interior of the SUV was roomy but even so Maddy was a little squished between the two large men. Still, she was grateful that, aside from the driver, they had the car to themselves. Simon, Tamara and Rich were no doubt squabbling in the cream-colored sedan purring silently behind them. *Probably fighting like cats and dogs*, Maddy thought dryly. It would have been funny if she wasn't so worried. What was waiting for them at the end of this winding mountain road? And how much longer would she be able to stay with Jake?

As if feeling her apprehension, Jake wove his fingers through hers and squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Whatever happens, remember I love you. Okay, darlin'?"

"And I care for you too. A lot." Will held her other hand and smiled.

"Thank you. Both of you." Maddy squeezed their hands, wishing the feeling of safety she had when sandwiched between them never had to end. Their two separate scents, Jake's warm and spicy and Will's clean and sharp, seemed to envelop her in a cocoon of contentment. She felt like she could take on the world and win as long as she had them on either side of her, holding her hands and giving her strength.

The warm feeling was over all too soon, however. The SUV came to a pair of towering, wrought iron gates that opened inward silently when their driver pushed a button. In her ear, so low she could barely hear it, Will murmured, "We're here."

Maddy watched with interest and apprehension as they entered the Lynx tribal grounds. To their right was a parking lot of amusement park proportions.

"Wow." She frowned doubtfully. "What's the deal with all the parking? How many members does the Lynx tribe have, anyway?"

Will laughed. "Not nearly enough to fill that lot. It's for the casino. Gets really crowded up here, especially on the weekends."

The SUV took a winding road that led beside the lot and soon Maddy saw why all the parking was necessary. Standing behind a six-story-high neon totem pole was an enormous building that was built in the form of a gigantic teepee.

"I know – tacky, isn't it?" Will murmured, watching her watch as they drove past at a leisurely pace. "And not exactly politically correct."



"Not exactly," Maddy agreed. She couldn't take her eyes off the behemoth of a building and its neon totem pole. "Why would the Lynx tribe want something like *that* on their property?"

"Well, first and foremost because it's made everyone in the tribe a millionaire several times over," Will said dryly. "As for the design—this is sarcasm writ large, sweetheart. This is how the Lynx people think the world sees them—they're just showing the humans what they want to see." He sighed. "Ironically, it's pretty much as close as we come to our roots."

Maddy frowned. "What do you mean?"

"He means the Lynxes have pretty much abandoned the old ways," Jake said. "They call themselves a tribe but they aren't too interested in maintaining the old customs and rituals."

"Well, customs and rituals don't put a luxury car in the garage of your four-million-dollar mansion now, do they?" Will grinned but it was clear he wasn't happy about it.

Jake shrugged. "Hey, who's to say the Lynx way is all bad?"

Maddy looked up at him. "Are the Wolf tribe the same way?"

He laughed. "Hardly, darlin'. The Wolves are the exact opposite. We're so damn mired in tradition and ritual you can't take a deep breath without smelling the smoke of the ancestors' holy fire. It gets kinda old after a while."

"He's right, it does." Will nodded and looked thoughtful. "You know though, Jake, facing the Council of Elders on the Lynx tribal grounds instead of the Wolf grounds is probably a good thing."

"How so?" Maddy asked.

"Well, the Council tends to be at least a little bit influenced by the tribe that's hosting them," Will explained. "And since the Lynxes are so *laissez faire* when it comes to tradition he might get off easier."

Jake gave a bark of laughter. "Yeah. If we were on the Wolf grounds they'd probably brand me with silver and Ghost me."

Will's tan face was suddenly pale. "Hey, don't even joke about that, Jake."

"What? What does that mean?" Maddy looked back and forth between them.

Will took a deep breath. "Once he comes into his animal form a shifter can heal almost any wound without a scar. There are only two exceptions. One, is when a half-breed is being inducted into the pack." He nodded at the white bite marks along Jake's muscular arms. "And two..."

"Is if silver is involved," Jake finished for him. "Our bodies have a hard time healing wounds made with silver and it always leaves a scar. So when you mark someone that way it's like a permanent reminder of what they've done."

"And a sign to any other shifters that the person so marked is an outcast," Will said grimly. "Someone who's cut off from his people permanently. That's what Ghosting is. Because the marked shifter is dead to his tribe from then on."

"And that's such a terrible thing?" Maddy asked. "I mean, forgive me because I know these people mean more to you than they do to me, but really... Jake's already a lone wolf, isn't he?"

"A lone wolf but not a Ghost wolf," Jake said. "When you're Ghosted, you're cut off from the energy of the tribe. It's like cutting your last lifeline—you can never go back."

Privately Maddy wondered why anyone would want to go back if people like Rich or Simon and Tamara were involved, but she didn't want to offend Jake and Will who looked very serious. Maybe there was another layer to the mysterious Ghosting that she didn't understand because she hadn't grown up in the Lynx tribe. She opened her mouth to ask another question but then the view outside the window changed and she forgot what she had been going to say.

The huge teepee and its neon totem pole were long gone and for some time the SUV had been climbing higher into the mountains on roads that bore the obvious marks of a snow plow. The Adirondacks were colder than the Blue Ridge but not necessarily snowier, which had surprised Maddy. Will had told her the weather patterns were very unpredictable but that the Lynx tribe made sure to keep themselves warm, safe and comfortable no matter what the conditions.

The cream-colored sedan took a turn to the left, leaving them and then the SUV passed through another wrought iron gate, this one even more elaborate than the first, and entered what looked like an elite gated community. But this was no mere upscale neighborhood. This was a community where Hollywood stars and sports heroes might live side-by-side. Everywhere Maddy looked mansions sprawled in palatial splendor. Most were reached through their own private gates and long, winding driveways but some were right up by the side of the road and in every driveway several luxury cars crouched like well-fed, satisfied cats.

"Wow," she breathed as the SUV drove slowly through the elegant homes. The splendor all around her made her think of one of those Middle Eastern countries where oil had made everyone living there filthy rich. She turned to Will. "Is one of these yours?"

He smiled. "Well, one of them is my mom and stepdad's. I keep a suite of rooms there but I don't actually spend enough time here to invest in a house. Not that I could afford one on this scale." He gestured out the windows at the lavish living quarters they were passing. "I was going to invite you to stay with me if you want to, until...until we get everything resolved."

"That's very nice of you," Maddy said graciously. "But, um, where will Jake stay?"

There was a flash of something like regret mixed with jealousy in Will's dark green eyes. "Well, actually..."

Just then the SUV stopped in front of a slightly less elaborate building with a sign out front that read Department of Corrections in elegant, curving script.

The driver, who had been silent up until now, turned to face them. "End of the line, Wolf," he told Jake matter-of-factly. "I have orders to deliver you here before I take the other two where they want to go. You gonna go nicely or should I call the guards?"

"Go where? Where is this place?" Maddy demanded, squeezing Jake's hand more tightly.

"They're not going to let me stay with you, darlin'. I'm sorry." Jake took her hand in both of his and squeezed gently. "This is the local lockup. I'll probably be here until my trial."

"But—" The word was barely out of Maddy's mouth when Jake's door opened and a big hand grabbed him by the shoulder.

"This the wolf that broke the taboo?" a harsh, masculine voice asked. Maddy saw two large men in khaki uniforms standing outside the SUV, waiting to take Jake away. How had they gotten there so quickly? Had the driver called them while she talked to Jake?

"That's him. Can't you smell it all over him?" The driver wrinkled his nose and nodded in Jake's direction.

"Stinks," agreed the guard, yanking on Jake's shoulder. "Come on, buddy. Out now."

Jake shrugged his shoulders angrily. "I'm coming on my own. Take your hands off me, you damn cat." He climbed out of the SUV stiffly and turned to face Maddy again. "Remember what I told you, darlin'."

"Oh Jake." Maddy blinked tears out of her eyes as the two huge guards took him by the arms. "I'll visit you every day, I promise." She tried to keep the quiver out of her voice and wasn't entirely successful.

"I'm afraid you won't be allowed to see him, Maddy," Will said softly as the guards started to pull Jake in the direction of the corrections building.

"Not even for a visit?" Maddy looked at him appealingly. "Why not?"

Will sighed unhappily. "They want to weaken the bond between you. So it'll be easier for you to choose a Lynx mate."

"But-but I don't *want* a Lynx mate." Maddy felt hot tears rising to her eyes and this time she didn't try to blink them away. "I just want Jake!"

"I know, sweetheart. I know." Will tried to put an arm around her but she pushed him away. The guards were leading Jake inside the building now, taking him away. Suddenly she realized there was a good possibility she would never see him again—not if the other shifters had anything to say about it.

"Why did I have to come here?" she demanded, glaring at Will. "I don't give a damn about you people or your stupid traditions and taboos. I *love* Jake and I want to be with him. Why can't you just leave us alone?"

Will looked tired. "Because that's not the way it works, Maddy. I'm sorry."

"No, you're not—not at all. Because you think I'll run to you the minute Jake is out of the picture, don't you? Well, don't you?" she demanded. She knew she was being unfair to Will, accusing him and lumping him in with all the other awful shifters she'd recently met, but she was so upset she didn't care.

Will frowned but didn't shout back. "I *had* planned to declare myself as your champion. And I hoped that you might consider me as a mate when the time came. But no, I'm *not* glad Jake is out of the picture. He's my best friend and I know how you feel about him. This has to be tearing both of you up inside."

The fact that he was so understanding only made things worse. Maddy turned her back to him and huddled in on herself, sobbing. The tears ran unchecked down her cheeks and her shoulders shook. She wished she could die or else go to sleep for about a million years. Anything to make the pain of losing Jake less. The farther he got from her, the more she felt as if there were a hole opening up in her heart. A hole that would never heal.

Will didn't say anything else and he didn't try to touch her again. Instead he said something to the driver and the SUV started moving, taking them farther into the luxurious Lynx community and farther away from Jake. Maddy was too upset to care where they were going. She just wanted to be somewhere she could finish crying in privacy and then curl up and go to sleep. In fact, sleep was creeping up on her now. Her misery was overwhelming to a degree that she felt like she'd just been running a marathon. It was crippling—debilitating. And utterly exhausting.

The trip seemed to last a long time or else maybe the driver was just taking it slow. After a while, despite herself, Maddy felt her eyelids closing. When Will murmured something and lifted her in his arms to leave the SUV, she was too tired to protest.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well, my dear, you've had quite a long sleep—two and a half days. Your first heat must have really worn you out." The light, feminine voice was the first thing Maddy heard when she woke up. She opened her eyes to see a red-haired woman of about fifty smiling tentatively at her.

"What?" Maddy felt groggy and still half asleep. She wondered where she was and then why she felt so desperately unhappy. Hadn't she been feeling wonderfully safe and content lately? She thought of Jake and Will and missed the warmth of their large male bodies on either side of her, comforting her, protecting her. Where were they?

Suddenly she remembered. Jake was in jail—or the Lynx version of it anyway—and Will was probably deeply offended by the way she'd accused him and shouted at him. They were both gone and she was alone, all alone in a world she didn't understand.

"Would you like something to drink? Maybe some coffee? Or I could make you a nice cup of hot tea," the red-haired woman said.

*Okay so not completely alone*, Maddy amended to herself. Will wasn't anywhere to be seen in the large, beautifully decorated bedroom she found herself in but at least he'd

been thoughtful enough to leave her with this nice woman. At least, Maddy *assumed* she was nice. So far she wasn't looking down her nose and making snide remarks, which was a good start as far as Maddy was concerned.

"I, uh, some tea would be nice," she said, since the woman seemed to want to give her something so badly. "Can you tell me if Will's around anywhere? He said he wanted me to stay with him at his mother's place." She had a sudden thought. "Are you his mom?"

The woman laughed and shook her head. "Me, Will's mom? Goodness no, child, I'm just a friend. I'm Vivien Moontree but you can call me Aunt Vivien—or just Aunt Viv, that's what Will calls me." Her hair was a shade darker than Maddy's own flame-colored locks and she wore it twisted into a loose bun on top of her head. Tendrils of dark red framed her plump face becomingly and Maddy realized that she was actually quite beautiful.

"Then...where is he?" Maddy hoped she didn't sound rude but it was disconcerting to wake up in a room she'd never seen before with a stranger standing over her, no matter how nice the stranger seemed to be.

"He said you were upset with him and that he thought it would be better for you to stay here. I hope you don't mind. I know it must be uncomfortable to wake up and not know where you are."

"It is, a little," Maddy admitted. Looking down, she realized she was still wearing the same jeans and green V-neck sweater she'd left her own apartment in days ago. "Um, I don't want to impose but do you have a washing machine I could use? It's a long story but I've been wearing these clothes for a while and—"

"I can do better than that—I've got a whole closet full of clothes that are exactly your size," the woman said.

"You do?" Maddy couldn't help looking at her doubtfully. Aunt Vivien was certainly lovely and in good shape for her age but she was also at least two or three sizes larger than Maddy.

"I don't mean *my* clothes, silly." Vivien smiled at her. "But you're the exact size and shape of my little sister Gwen. This is her room you're staying in and there's her closet." She pointed to what appeared to be the entrance to a large, walk-in closet in one corner of the bedroom.

"I am?" Maddy swung her legs over the side of the large, plush bed that had a pale blue comforter with gold flowers embroidered on it. "That's nice but are you sure she won't mind me using her room or wearing her clothes?"

"Very sure." Vivien's lovely face was suddenly sad. "She disappeared over twenty-five years ago and I haven't heard from her since. You know..." She cocked her head to one side and looked at Maddy appraisingly. "You look a lot like her. Will said you'd been raised as a human. Did you ever know your shifter parents at all?"

"No. I had no idea about any of this until Jake—he was the one who found me..." Maddy had to swallow hard before she went on. "Until he told me what I was."

Vivien patted her hand consolingly. "I understand. Will explained what happened and I want you to know I don't blame you a bit for what you had to do."

Maddy tried to smile at her. "Thank you. It's nice to meet someone who isn't freaking out because I broke a rule I didn't even know existed a few days ago."

"I'm afraid shifters can be a little bit set in their ways." Vivien smiled at her. "But don't you worry – everything will come out all right in the end."

At another time Maddy might have disliked her for her Pollyanna attitude but at the moment she felt Vivien's optimism like a breath of fresh air. Besides, after losing Jake and alienating Will, she needed all the friends she could get. So she smiled back and asked if she could take a shower.

"Oh of course you can! I should have asked you that first before I offered you anything to drink. You must want a shower after sleeping the last two days and nights in your clothes."

Maddy frowned. "Wait—I went to sleep on the twenty-first of December. Are you telling me that..."

"It's the morning of the twenty-third. The day before Christmas Eve," Vivien finished for her. "Quite a long sleep. If you would have slept any longer I was going to call the tribal healer. Luckily you woke up when I came to check on you this morning." She beamed.

"Is-is that normal?" Maddy remembered the feeling of lethargy and exhaustion that had dragged her down after she'd yelled at Will and cried her eyes out. At the time she'd felt like she could sleep forever but it still seemed strange that she'd been out of it for so long. "Am I all right?" she asked Vivian anxiously.

The older woman nodded. "Oh yes, dear—you were exhausted from your trip and losing your bonded lover—not to mention getting through your first heat, which always makes a female tired and emotional."

"It does?" Maddy looked at her with renewed interest. It suddenly occurred to her that she might get more detailed and relevant information about her new biology from Vivien than Jake or Will had been able to tell her.

"Absolutely," Vivien affirmed. "Being in heat is like getting your period times ten—it can make a female crazy if she doesn't have a male to tend to her. And even if she does it still makes her hormones go all over the place. You'll get used to it though," she said, smiling encouragingly at Maddy. "Now, the shower is just through here..." She led the way through a small white door at one end of the room that Maddy hadn't noticed previously and into a beautifully decorated bathroom with a deep tub.

"This is lovely, thank you," Maddy said when Vivien had pointed out a stack of plush pink towels and a wonderful array of bath products.

"Take as long as you want." The older woman smiled at the way Maddy was eyeing the line-up of designer bubble bathes ranged to one side of the tub. "I'll go downstairs and make you some breakfast and that cup of tea I promised you. Just come down whenever you're ready."

Maddy started to tell her not to bother when she realized she was absolutely starving. She hadn't had anything to eat since the brunch they'd been served on the plane ride days ago and she'd been too nervous to do more than pick at that. "All right," she said instead, smiling at Vivien. "Thank you so much."

Vivien beamed. "Any friend of Will's is a friend of mine. Especially one who looks so much like my little sister." She shut the door and left Maddy alone to contemplate her bubble bath selection.

Maddy took her time drawing the bath and getting undressed. The feeling of horrible unhappiness had been pushed back a little while she was talking to the cheerful Vivien but now, as she slid into the hot soapy water, it came rushing back like a wave trying to drown her.

"Jake," she whispered to herself as the bubbles closed over her body. "Oh Jake..."

It seemed impossible to believe that a week before she hadn't even known he existed. It felt like they'd been together forever, like they were two halves of a whole and she was crippled without him. But it wasn't just Jake that she was missing. Slowly, Maddy realized that she was feeling Will's absence too. She understood that he was probably mad at her but it still hurt that he'd left her with a stranger, no matter how nice, instead of keeping her nearby.

She tried to relax in the heated water but thoughts of Jake and Will wouldn't let her. She wondered where both of them were and how they were feeling. She wished she could see Jake again, wished she could kiss him and smell his spicy scent and feel his strong arms around her. She wished she could tell Will she was sorry—sorry about what she'd said and that she couldn't feel for him the same way she felt about Jake.

Finally Maddy gave up and got out of the tub. "Waste of a perfectly good bubble bath," she muttered to herself as she wrapped herself in a shell pink towel and padded back to the bedroom.

She was hesitant at first to go into the huge walk-in closet but practicality compelled her to. After all, what else was she supposed to do for clothes? It was creepy to think of wearing what were probably a dead woman's clothes but she absolutely refused to put back on the crumpled jeans and stale sweater. Firming her resolve, she lifted her chin and stepped into the closet.

Rows and rows of outdated clothes met her eyes. Most of them looked to be from the late seventies or early eighties but they were all in pristine condition, as though someone took care of them on a regular basis. *This isn't a closet – it's a shrine*, she realized as she thumbed carefully through the racks. Vivien must really miss her little sister. And she must trust Maddy a lot to allow her to wear her sister's clothes.

Being careful not to damage anything, Maddy picked a pair of flare-leg jeans with green and blue butterflies embroidered on one leg and a soft pale jade sweater to go with them. When she had the clothes on she discovered they didn't look out of date so much as retro and they fit her perfectly, as though they'd been made for her.

“Not bad,” she told the mirror, glad she’d been wearing her plain black boots when she first left her apartment with Jake. They had a low, comfortable heel and they went with everything.

Her stomach rumbled again, reminding her that she was hungry, and Maddy decided to go downstairs. Maybe she could pump Vivien for information about her condition. And maybe, just maybe, she could find out the possibility of ever seeing Jake or Will again.



## Chapter Fourteen

"Oh my." Vivien put a hand to her heart when Maddy appeared and her large brown eyes widened dramatically.

"Is everything okay?" Maddy looked at her hostess anxiously. She had descended a long spiral staircase and found her way to the warm, sunny kitchen, mainly by the smell of frying bacon, and her stomach was growling. But now she was afraid she'd done something wrong. *Maybe I shouldn't have worn these clothes. Is this a special outfit or something?*

"No, nothing's wrong. It's just..." Vivien took a step forward, her eyes never leaving Maddy. "It's just that dressed in her clothes you look so much like Gwen. I'm sorry but I have to ask, do you know anything about your parents at all?"

Maddy shrugged apologetically. "Only my mother's maiden and last name and I had a hard time even finding that out. The records were partially destroyed in a fire and what was left wasn't very revealing." She thought of the smudged fragment of a birth certificate she had carefully concealed along with a few other important documents at her apartment. She'd been born at a tiny country hospital that made the place she worked now look like the Houston Medical Center and the hungry blaze had taken almost the entire place. What little had been salvaged from the fire was all she had.

"I understand. But...do you mind if I ask what those names were?" Vivien was still looking at her hopefully.

"My mom's maiden name was Takohs and her married name was Grant," Maddy said. "Ring any bells? Is Takohs your maiden name too?"

"No," Vivien whispered but her eyes were shining. "No, it's not. But it *is* a kind of all-purpose name we Lynxes use when we go out among the humans. It means cat in Mohawk."

"It does?" Maddy shook her head. "I guess I never thought of it meaning anything in another language. I know I searched and searched for anyone else with the Takohs surname and came up with a big fat nothing. What about Grant?" she asked. "Was...was your sister married to someone by that name?" A spark of excitement was leaping inside her chest but she was afraid to pay attention to it. She'd looked for so long for her parents, for any relation at all and it had all been for nothing. But now...

"Grant was the name of the male she wanted to mate." Vivien's eyes were shiny with unshed tears. "She left because the tribe's First Cat declared their match void." Tears overflowed her brown eyes—eyes that looked a lot like her own, Maddy suddenly realized. "She...she must have been pregnant when she left and didn't know it. Oh Gwen...my little sister." She broke down completely, covering her face with her hands, her plump shoulders shaking with sobs.

"Oh dear. I'm so sorry, Aunt Vivien." Maddy patted her back and as she said the words she realized that they were true. This woman really *was* her aunt. It was almost too much to comprehend that she actually had relatives after all this time but no other explanation made sense.

"No, no...please, I'm the one that's sorry." Vivien looked up, making an attempt to wipe the tears from her eyes. "It's just, we were so close. And I wondered why I never heard from her. I mean, the Council Ghosted her but I thought...I never thought she'd leave and never talk to me again."

"Maybe she's still out there somewhere," Maddy said, trying to be comforting.

Vivien shook her head. "She would never abandon her baby. No, I think she must have died in childbirth. That's usually what happens when a shifter female gives birth without a tribal doctor to help her." She started crying again. "It's so horribly, horribly ironic. And it's all my fault."

"What? How could it be your fault?"

"Because...because Grant was the younger brother of my mate, Brock, who passed away a few years ago. But we—Brock and I—couldn't have any children. After it became clear that we weren't a good match for procreation purposes the First Cat declared Gwen's mating with Grant null and void—because the same genes were going into the mix, you know. He told both of them to find another mate. Only Gwen didn't want another mate. She announced her intention to leave the tribe and declare loner status. But females aren't allowed to do that."

"Because of their needs when they go into heat, right?" Maddy was only now beginning to realize what a burden her new second nature was going to be. The saying "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle" wasn't exactly true in the shifter world. In fact, a shifter female *did* need a man, badly and regularly every month. So much for ever being completely independent again. *Good thing I never had aspirations to become a nun*, she thought dryly.

"When they go into heat, yes." Vivien nodded. "Anyway, Gwen had already had her first heat and bonded to Grant. She swore nothing could break the bond between them but death—said she would leave with him and the two of them would start their own tribe. Of course the Council couldn't allow that—it takes the energy of at least three souls to make a tribe." She sniffed. "If only they had known she was pregnant—she probably didn't know herself until it was too late. But if they had known, she and Grant would have been allowed to stay together. Or to break off on their own if they wanted to because the baby would have made the third soul."

"What happened to Grant when Gwen—when my mom—declared loner status?" The words felt both strange and right at the same time.

Vivien shook her head. "They Ghosted her and they flogged Grant with a silver barbed whip because he was going to go with her. The heaviest burden of punishment always falls on the male."

Maddy felt a chill run down her spine. "It does. So what happened to him? Did the, uh, whipping change his mind?"

"It killed him," Vivien said flatly. "He was already weak from pining for Gwen and his system couldn't handle the silver poisoning. That was when Gwen ran away. She left me a note but all it said was that she couldn't stay here anymore and that she loved me and would try to get in touch with me soon. I just don't understand how she could not tell me she was having a baby."

"Maybe she was scared," Maddy said reasonably. "I mean, I don't know much about shifter society but from what I can tell it seems pretty harsh. Are there penalties for being unwed and pregnant?"

"Not penalties exactly...more like a stigma. A child of a broken mating is considered unlucky and not...not treated very well by the rest of the tribe. Oh dear." Vivien put a hand to the side of her face. "Here I was so excited to find you – and I still am, dear – but maybe we should keep this to ourselves. Not for me but for you."

"Probably a good idea," Maddy said dryly. "Since everyone I meet is already treating me like I killed someone just for being with Jake."

"Breaking the mating taboo brings another kind of stigma." Vivien sounded apologetic.

"But why? What's the point of it anyway?" Maddy realized that she had just accepted what Jake and Will told her and never asked the reason behind it. "Why should it be taboo for shifters of one tribe to mate with the shifters from another?" she demanded, looking at Vivien. "What harm can it possibly do?"

"It's not what it *does* do so much as what it *doesn't* do." Vivien sighed. "Come sit down and have some breakfast and I'll tell you." She led the way through the large, immaculately clean kitchen to a cozy breakfast nook beside a bay window. The view was of a pristine stretch of white that led to the edge of a rambling wood. Vivien's backyard, Maddy guessed – with nothing to mar the virgin snow's surface but a few bird tracks. It was gorgeous but she had too much on her mind to admire its beauty.

"Thank you," she said when Vivien poured her some streaming hot tea from an old-fashioned china teapot with pink roses painted on its side. "This smells delicious."

"I'm glad you think so. I hope you like veggie frittata," Vivien said shyly, indicating something that looked like a quiche with no crust in the middle of the table. "It's one of my specialties."

"It looks...wonderful," Maddy said, trying to sound sincere. The fact was she was so hungry she was willing to try anything but there seemed to be an awful lot going on in the quiche-like concoction. Bits of red and green and brown and...purple? *Is there eggplant in it too?* She pulled her mind away from the list of possible ingredients abruptly as Vivien started loading her plate with frittata, hash browns and bacon. "The taboo?" she asked again, taking a sip of her tea.

Vivien had picked up her fork to dig into her own breakfast but now she put it down and shook her head. "It's a long story that goes back to our roots – to the origins

of the three tribes." Her soft, feminine voice dropped a little and took on the cadences of a storyteller. "Legend has it that the Sun and Moon were brother and sister and while the Sun had many human children who lived on the Earth, the Moon had none. The Moon became jealous of her brother, the Sun, and decided to make a race of people who would outshine his children as his light outshone hers.

"So she made the shifters, mixing the cunning of the lynx, the fierceness of the wolf, and the great and terrible strength of the bear into her new children and gave them the power to change from one form to the other at night while she was in the sky to watch over them.

"But the Sun was angry at his sister's creation. He saw that her people were stronger than his, more cunning and more fierce. So he complained to Grandfather Sky, saying that the Moon's children would kill or overpower his children if they were allowed to live. For what human can compete with the slyness of a cat on the prowl or the ferocity of a wolf pack on the hunt? And what human can escape the embrace of a grizzly bear when it is enraged?

"The Moon pleaded for her children but the Sun had always been Grandfather Sky's favorite child. So he took steps to limit her children and keep them from overrunning the Earth. He declared that for every hundred babies the Sun's human children had, the Moon's shifter children would have only one.

"But the Sun was still not satisfied. He pointed out that even one child of the Moon could kill dozens of his own children if he or she combined all the strengths of the three animals the Moon had used to make them. So again Grandfather Sky intervened. He decreed that in the shifter world, like must mate with like—Lynx with Lynx, Wolf with Wolf and Bear with Bear. And none of the three must mix."

Maddy recognized the words. It was the same phrase Jake had used when she first asked why he couldn't help her out instead of calling a male from the Lynx tribe. She wanted to ask if this story was always passed on from the older generation to the younger one but she didn't want to interrupt the story that Vivien was telling so beautifully. So she only nodded and took another sip of tea as her aunt continued.

"Grandfather Sky decreed it taboo for the shifter tribes to mix with each other although on occasion they were allowed to mix with humans in order to bring new blood into the tribe. In this way the shifter blood would gradually be diluted and the threat to the Sun's children would be no more. Then he said that if the taboo was violated the shifters who broke it would be cursed to childlessness—they and all their tribes unless the tribal elders disowned them and cast them out.

"And so the shifters have lived from that day to this. It is said we can never violate the taboo without Grandfather Sky knowing because during the day the Sun will tell him and at night we cannot escape his gaze for he is ever watching with his many eyes, the stars."

Vivien looked up at Maddy, smiling a little. "And that's the story."

Maddy stopped eating with a piece of bacon halfway to her mouth. "So that's it? That's the reason I can't be with Jake? Because of some old legend that says we can't have kids?"

Her aunt sighed and took a sip of her own tea. "It is a legend but it has some basis in fact too. Throughout the years whenever two people of different tribes have dared to break the taboo they have failed to have any children, no matter how passionate their union was."

"Well that sucks but it still doesn't seem to be a good enough reason to separate two people in love," Maddy protested. "Unless...they don't really believe that the actions of one couple can affect the fertility of the entire tribe, do they?"

Vivien frowned. "I don't know if any of us really believes it in our heads but in our hearts and our bones...well, it's a different matter. The shifter birth rate is low enough as it is. Every year we have fewer members because fewer babies are born. Our young people are leaving to go live with the humans—the males are, anyway. The females are pretty much stuck here but fewer of them are born than males anyway." She shook her head. "It's a bad situation and I think everyone is afraid of making it worse."

"But...but it's just an old superstition. A legend to scare people into conforming." Maddy took a gulp of tea, so upset she barely felt the hot liquid scalding the inside of her mouth.

"With us legends have a way of becoming facts." Vivien looked sad. "We shifters are too stuck in our ways. But I'm afraid things aren't about to change any time soon."

"Not in time for Jake's trial, anyway." Maddy felt sick. "God, what have I gotten him into?"

"Nothing he didn't want to get into." Will's voice behind her startled Maddy so much that she jumped and almost lost her fork. "Sorry, didn't mean to sneak up on you," he said, taking a seat between her and Vivien. "Mind if I join you for breakfast?"

Vivien beamed at him. "You know you're welcome anytime, Will. And I made your favorite too—veggie frittata."

Will winked at her. "I guess it's my lucky day, Aunt Viv."

"Oh, speaking of being an aunt..." Vivien's brown eyes sparkled and she smiled at Maddy. "I think it's safe to tell Will, dear, don't you?"

"I suppose so." Maddy couldn't help grinning at her aunt's eagerness to share the news. "Go ahead."

"Will, you'll never guess but Maddy and I have figured out we're related. I believe that her mother was my little sister Gwen. The one who went missing after the council Ghosted her so many years ago."

Will grinned at the older woman charmingly. "You know, Aunt Viv, I'm not a bit surprised. I had a feeling about you two the minute I saw Maddy. Although I admit you weren't the *first* thing that came to mind." He arched an eyebrow at Maddy and his eyes flashed pale green for just an instant.

Maddy felt her cheeks heat as she remembered the circumstances of their first meeting—of the way Jake had been breeding her when Will first walked in and saw them. Glaring at Will, she stabbed a piece of frittata, pushing it blindly into her mouth. She was sorry an instant later when a huge slimy chunk of eggplant nearly choked her as she tried to swallow.

“Oh dear,” Vivien said as Maddy choked and coughed. “Something go down the wrong pipe, dear? And we’re all out of tea too. Excuse me, I’ll get some more.” She got up and bustled away with the teapot, leaving Maddy alone with Will who was staring at her sympathetically.

“What did you get? A big piece of jalapeno?” He gestured at her barely touched frittata.

“Eggplant,” Maddy managed to croak, after washing down the slimy chunk with the last dregs of her tea. “I’ve never liked it—I have texture issues.”

“Hmm, well it’s nice to know your vegetarian past has a few dark corners.” He grinned and took a big bite of the large portion Vivien had served him. “Aunt Viv’s cooking takes a little getting used to but she really is a sweetheart. She’s one of the only members of the tribe who treats me like a full blooded Lynx instead of a half-breed.”

“She seems very nice. And it’s amazing to find a relative after all these years. I don’t feel so much like an orphan anymore.”

Will nodded. “Thank your lucky stars that it’s Aunt Viv you’re related to. How would you like to find out that Tamara was your long-lost cousin?”

Maddy shuttered. “Ugh, you’re right. That would really suck.”

“No kidding.” He took another bite of frittata and made a face. “Mmm, brussels sprouts. The breakfast of champions.”

Maddy stared down at her plate. Will seemed completely willing to overlook the way they had parted a few days before but she just couldn’t let it go. “Look, I know I shouted at you yesterday and I said some things that were pretty unfair...”

“Don’t worry about it.” Will gave her a mocking grin. “Everyone’s entitled to their opinion. And you know what they say about opinions, don’t you?”

“That they’re like assholes because everybody has one?” Maddy raised an eyebrow at him.

He widened his eyes and put one hand on his chest. “Actually I was going to say that opinions are like *bellybuttons*, but since you want to be crude...”

“I’m *trying* to apologize to you.” Maddy didn’t know whether to laugh or be exasperated. “I shouldn’t have said those things. I was angry and I lashed out. I’m sorry.”

Will’s face was abruptly serious. “Apology accepted—on one condition.”

“Which is?”

“Let me escort you to the Christmas M&G down at the casino tonight.”

Maddy frowned. “The M&G?”

"The Meet and Greet," Vivien clarified, bustling back into the room with the steaming teapot in her hands. "Oh my, you two are going to make such a lovely couple!"

Will held out his teacup to her. "I don't think Maddy is ready to be a couple with anyone but Jake, Aunt Viv," he said dryly as she poured him some tea. "But she has to meet the rest of the tribe sometime and I'd feel better if she was with me when she did." He looked at Maddy. "Well, will you come?"

Maddy looked down at her half-eaten frittata. "Is this some kind of a social requirement for the whole tribe? Something where you get punished if you don't go?"

Will laughed. "Hardly. It's more like a monthly thing—the Lynx tribal council encourages everyone to spend some time in the casino to know where their money is coming from and how their investments are being handled. So we make a kind of party of it and this month, for obvious reasons, it's a Christmas theme. Full-blooded shifters are more into celebrating Winter Solstice but there are enough of us half-breeds around to infect the rest with the Christmas spirit."

"Well..." Maddy took a sip of tea to stall. "And you say I have to meet these people anyway?"

Vivien nodded. "Oh yes, dear—the males especially. And it's better to meet them tonight than to see them for the first time in the mating circle."

"Mating circle? What's that?" Maddy felt a tickle of unease, like a spider crawling down her back.

"You'll find out, probably sooner than you want to," Will said grimly. He looked at Vivien. "Do you have anything Christmassy Maddy can wear?"

She nodded. "Oh yes, I'm sure there's something in Gwen's...in her mother's closet that will fit her. The clothes might be a little out of style..."

"That's okay." Maddy tried to smile. "I like the retro look."

Will's gaze brushed over the pale jade sweater she was wearing, taking in the swells of her breasts before lifting to her eyes. "I'd say it suits you," he murmured.

She could feel the hot blood climbing to her cheeks and she looked away quickly. Why did he still affect her like this when it was Jake she wanted?

"Well then, I'm sure we can have Maddy ready to go on time." Aunt Vivien sounded as excited as Cinderella's fairy godmother getting her ready for the ball. "Oh, this reminds me of when Gwen and I were both single and still looking for mates. It's so *exciting*."

"I'm sure it will be," Maddy said, taking another sip of tea and refusing to meet Will's eyes. But inside she had a growing feeling of dread. Somehow she didn't think spending an evening trying to pick a mate from men she'd never met before was going to be much fun. Especially considering the only one she wanted was behind bars.

\* \* \* \* \*

As they walked into the huge teepee casino Maddy was sure that everyone from the bouncers at the door to the blackjack dealers they passed was staring at her. The human customers of the place were apparently oblivious, focusing their attention on the next jackpot or hand of cards. But the pale eyes of the shifters in the crowd followed her relentlessly and not all of the looks she was getting were friendly.

"Do I look okay?" she asked Will nervously as they made their way through the crowded, noisy slot machine area where the machines beeped and booped, their lights flashing like Christmas trees at every turn.

Most men would have given her a quick and insincere reassurance but Will actually stopped once they'd gotten past the loudest of the machines and gave her a leisurely once-over. Maddy could feel herself blushing as his gaze swept over her body, starting at her elegantly upswept hair, lingering on the skin-tight little black dress she'd found at the back of her mother's closet and ending at the stylish black kitten heels her aunt had loaned her. Thank goodness she and Vivien wore the same shoe size at least.

"Yes," he said at last, smiling at her. "More than okay – spectacular."

"Thank you." Maddy crossed her arms over her breasts protectively. "You didn't have to look at me like that, you know. You could have just said yes."

"And miss a chance to look you over? I don't think so." He grinned and his eyes flashed from emerald to pale green and back again. "You really do look good, you know. Even in retro couture you're going to outshine every other woman here tonight. Which means you need to be careful – females like Tamara don't like being outshone."

Maddy nibbled her lower lip. "I don't know the rules here. Is she going to challenge me to a duel or something?"

Will laughed. "Nothing like that, sweetheart. She'll probably just be extra catty. Actually, it's not the females you have to worry about so much as the males. The word is out that there's a new unmated female on the market and there are plenty of unmated males who'd be happy to do the honors when your heat comes back."

"What do you mean when my heat *comes back*? You and Jake um...took care of me really well. And I just slept for the past two and a half days. Don't you think it's over by now?"

Will shrugged mysteriously. "Possibly. But the mating circle has been known to change a female's cycle and bring on her heat even if she just finished it. Besides, a first heat is always unpredictable."

Maddy felt queasy. "In other words, I could be in for another relapse?" What would she do if that happened? Jake was no longer around to take care of her and the idea of being with Will, without Jake involved, still bothered her.

Will shrugged. "It's not over 'til it's over."

"Okay, I guess I'll deal with that if I have to." Maddy took a deep breath. "But what's the mating circle? And how does it affect me?"



"It's—" But just then they reached the far end of the casino and came to a small, discreet black door guarded by a massive bouncer.

"Will Tanner and Madeline Grant," Will said pleasantly, smiling at the huge shifter who was blocking the door.

"Haven't seen her before," the bouncer growled, looking at Maddy suspiciously.

"That's because Maddy here is new in town. She's been living among the humans and just had her first heat recently. So would you mind letting us in?"

A sly, stupid smile spread over the bouncer's lumpish face. "Oh yeah—she's the one who broke the taboo and fucked a Wolf. The Council oughta have fun with that asshole."

"The Wolf in question happens to be my best friend. And either you talk about Maddy with respect or I'll make sure you're not able to talk at all." Will's smile was still pleasant but there was an edge of steel in his voice and he suddenly seemed to grow bigger in the dim light.

"Yeah? You think you can do that?" The bouncer leaned forward menacingly.

"I know I can," Will said quietly. "I'm Maddy's champion and I'll fight for her honor. To the death if I have to. Now would you like to rethink your earlier comments and welcome us into the club? Or do I have to prove I mean what I say?"

The bouncer gave them an uneasy look and Maddy hoped he would take Will at his word and just let them through. The last thing she wanted to see was a fight to the death in her honor. But finally the massive shifter seemed to relent.

"Aw, go on. You're not worth it," he muttered and opened the door.

"Thank you." Will nodded courteously at him and gestured to Maddy. "Ladies first, sweetheart."

"Thank you." Maddy tried not to look at the angry bouncer as she passed him but she couldn't help wondering if this was the kind of treatment she could expect inside the exclusive shifter club as well. Was breaking the shifter taboo the same as being the "easy" girl in high school? How could she deal with a room full of people who thought she was a slut? And who was to say they weren't right? *You had sex with Jake less than twenty-four hours after meeting him*, whispered a little voice in her head. *And then you let Will do whatever he wanted to you less than twenty-four hours after that. And admit it, Maddy – you enjoyed every minute of it.*

Maddy tried to push the accusatory little voice away but she couldn't deny the truth of the words it whispered in her head. It wasn't that she had been raised to be a prude by any of her foster families but two men in as many days was still far outside the realm of anything she'd done sexually before. And the worst thing was she could feel herself wanting to do it again. The sensual memory of being held between two hard masculine bodies was still strong inside her. She had Will on one side of her, holding her arm, but she felt unprotected, almost naked on the other side as they entered the dimly lit room. A sudden rush of longing for Jake flooded her and she bit her lower lip and squeezed her eyes closed against the stinging tears that wanted to come.

"Hey, Maddy – you all right?" Will's voice was soft and concerned, his gaze fixed on her face when she opened her eyes and looked up at him.

"Fine," she said tightly. "Just...missing Jake."

Will's eyes went flat and hard. "I understand. I know I'm a poor substitute."

"No, Will...I didn't mean –"

"Well, well, if it isn't the little lost lamb." The purring voice to their right cut off her explanation and Maddy looked up with dread to see Simon and Tamara approaching.

"Hello, Simon. Hello, Tamara," Will said evenly, nodding to them both. "It's not at all nice to see you again."

"Oh Will, you naughty boy." Tamara smiled coyly. Tonight she was dressed in a tight, fire-engine red dress that showcased her bones since she really didn't have any curves to speak of. She leaned in to air kiss Will's cheek, completely ignoring Maddy in the process.

Maddy didn't care about being ignored by the bitchy female – she just wanted to get away from her. Tuning out whatever it was Will and the other two shifters were talking about, she studied her surroundings, looking for the nearest exit in case she decided to leave early.

The club was dimly lit with tables for two and four scattered around a roughly rectangular area with a bar at one end and a small dance floor at the other. Some of the tables were tall enough to stand at and had high stools to go with them but most were the more normal sit-down variety and almost all were full of shifters on the prowl. Their eyes glowed in the dim lighting and she noticed that the dress code seemed to be perfectly tailored suits for men and expensive and revealing cocktail dresses for women.

Well, at least she wasn't underdressed – the little black dress she had on showed plenty of cleavage and was slit high in the back, almost up to her ass. Of course that precluded regular panty hose so she was wearing sheer black lacy thigh high stockings instead. The only thing that made her nervous was her lack of underwear. She hadn't been able to bear the idea of wearing the pink set she'd brought from home again without washing them first and it certainly wasn't an item she could ask to borrow like shoes. So under the hem of her sexy little dress Maddy was bare. She just hoped Will didn't find out.

On either side of the main area Maddy saw semi-private booths with gauzy curtains hanging in front of them. Some of the booths were occupied and she wasn't entirely sure that the people inside them were just eating and drinking. The scent of sex hung heavily in the air along with something else – a kind of feral perfume that seemed to speak to something inside her. Trying to ignore the uncomfortable feeling she got from the evocative scent, she focused on the club's decorations. Strung everywhere were tiny colored twinkle lights and there was a miniature Christmas tree on the bar to round things out. *Very festive. Now if only I could find the exit.*

She was already regretting the fact that she'd come here in the first place, especially when she realized that she was being stared at again by most of the people in the club. The males' eyes were pale green and hungry but the looks the female shifters were giving her was pure hostility. *They hate me already*, Maddy realized uneasily. *Because I'm an outsider and they think I want to steal their men.*

"Think that a mating dance is appropriate." Tamara's bitchy voice dragged Maddy's attention back to the conversation and away from the hostile and hungry eyes.

"I don't think so," Will said firmly. "Remember that Maddy was raised as a human—she isn't used to tribal customs."

"Well maybe it's time she *got* used to them." Tamara raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow at Maddy. "If you're not afraid, that is."

Maddy put a hand on her hip. "So I'm supposed to engage in some dangerous tribal ritual just because you *dare* me to do it? Are we in middle school here?"

"Oh, it's not dangerous. Not dangerous at all." Simon smiled his insincere smile. "It's just kind of a prelude to the mating circle. Gets everyone warmed up for the main event if you know what I mean."

"But it's just dancing?" Maddy actually liked to dance—it was something she'd always done well physically, even back when she wasn't interested in sex.

Will frowned. "Well...it's a little bit more than that. The problem is—"

"That we don't have the right music," Tamara finished for him brightly. Stepping over to the small dance floor, she said something to the shifter DJ Maddy hadn't noticed earlier. He nodded and soon the sound of drums filled the club.

The sound was soft and low, a deceptively seductive rhythm that seemed to wake something in her blood and made Maddy want to close her eyes and sway her hips. For the first time since she'd entered the casino club she began to feel good. The wild scent in the air, the low, slow drumbeat that vibrated all around her, and even the eyes she could feel watching her combined to make her feel warm and free and completely alive.

"I like this." She turned to Will, smiling. "Come on, let's dance."

"Oh you can't just dance with Will," Tamara objected. "You have to give the other males a chance as well. That will make it *so* much easier when you decide who to pick as a mate."

"I don't see how—" Maddy began but before she could finish her thought a tall man with dark blond hair was standing in front of her.

"Madeline Grant, meet Sam Redbird," Tamara said, smiling in a way that Maddy didn't trust. "I believe he'd like to dance with you."

"Um..." Maddy looked at Will uncertainly. He had a grim look on his face but he only shrugged his shoulders at her unspoken question.

"Go on, have some fun." Tamara nudged her toward the big man whose eyes were glowing pale green in the dim light.

"Nice to meet you," Maddy said, giving him her hand reluctantly.

"You too." His voice was low and gruff and he drew her out onto the dance floor at once without another word.

"Um, it's a nice night," she said, trying to make conversation but the man, or male, as she supposed she ought to think of him, only grunted and pulled her close.

"Hey!" Maddy wasn't sure she cared for him to begin with. But when he began a full-body contact grind, her uncertainty crystallized into full-blown dislike. She tried to push him away but the male with dark blond hair only held her tighter. By now she could feel exactly how happy he was to be with her—a hard, hot lump was pressing against her thigh as he pumped against her in time to the rhythmic beat.

Worst of all, her body seemed to be responding to the blatant come-on. Despite her dislike of her partner Maddy could feel herself getting wet between her thighs. It was as though her body had an on button she hadn't known about and this jerk was pressing it like an impatient man leaning on a doorbell.

Maddy was horrified. "Let me go," she hissed in his ear. "I said I'd dance with you, not let you dry hump my leg."

He laughed harshly in her ear. "Look around, babydoll, this *is* how we dance around here. Besides, you know you love it." It was true that the couples around them were also engaging in the same full-body contact that made any kind of dirty dancing she'd ever seen look as tame as the waltz, but Maddy didn't care. She just wanted to get away before her body reacted more.

"I do *not* like this," she insisted. "And I don't care what everyone else is doing—I don't know you well enough to dance this way." Not that she thought a closer acquaintance would improve his character any. He smelled. Not bad, exactly—just different. Wrong. But at the same time, right enough that her nipples were hard and her pussy felt hot and wet. What the hell was happening to her?

The male laughed again. "You don't want to do the mating dance with me but you'll fuck a Wolf the first chance you get—is that it?"

"What I do with my body is *my* business," Maddy shot back. "And right now what I'd like to do with it is get it away from *you*."

"Fine." His nose wrinkled. "You stink like Wolf anyway. That and half-breed."

Before she could say anything else he was pushing her away. But to Maddy's dismay she didn't wind up on the edge of the dance floor. Instead, another male pulled her close and began the mating dance all over again.

"No!" Maddy pushed against his muscular shoulders to no avail. Their bodies were already locked together, breast-to-chest and pelvis-to-pelvis with his arms tight around her.

"Take it easy, honey." The man, who had squinty eyes and a hooked nose, smiled at her encouragingly. "I've been looking at you from the minute you got in here."

"That's nice but I'd like to go now, please." He smelled wrong too, but again, right enough to make her body want him. *Ugh, I can't feel like that. He's disgusting!* But her

body didn't care. Apparently all it wanted was a make shifter – preferably another Lynx if possible.

"Aw now, come on, sweet thing – you don't want to go just yet. Lemme have my turn to get to know you first before I pass you on." He grinned at her but it looked more like a leer to Maddy. And the way he talked about passing her on made her skin crawl. Something in his tone seemed to indicate more than dancing and she had a sudden mental image of herself naked in the center of a group of men, their eyes blazing with lust and anticipation as she took them, one after the other over and over... *God no, I can't – I wouldn't! Is that what Will meant by the mating circle? What am I going to do?*

Maddy pushed against the male again and he finally released her with an angry snarl. Free at last, she tried to find her way to the edge of the dance floor, only to find herself held in another set of unfamiliar arms. Was this ever going to end? Her body throbbed in time to the drumbeats and all around her was a crush of people grinding together, their eyes wild as they pumped and swayed to the seductive rhythm. There was no escape.

Maddy was beginning to panic as she was passed from one set of masculine arms to the next. If she didn't get away soon something very bad was going to happen. Unwanted need and desire were washing over her, making her feel like she had once when she'd gotten out too far at the beach and the blue-green breakers had crashed over her head until she thought she would drown. The demands of her body were dizzying – deafening. All she could see was a sea of male faces. All she could feel was the throbbing, aching emptiness between her thighs. And soon all she would be able to do was give in – give in to whatever man – whatever stranger – she happened to be with when she finally lost control.

*God, please stop! No more – no more. Just need to get away. Please...*

"Relax, sweetheart. It's all right – I've got you."

The familiar voice in her ear almost made Maddy sob with relief. "Will!" She threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in the warm skin of his throat. "God, I was so scared. I need...I need..."

"I know what you need," he said roughly, pulling her close.

This time the feel of a hot, hard cock branding her thigh didn't upset her. It felt good – right in a way that it hadn't with her other partners. And Will smelled right too. Completely right. With a sob of pure desire, Maddy pressed back against him, spreading her thighs to welcome him in, moaning breathlessly when the heated ridge of his cock parted her slippery folds through the thin material of her black dress.

"Please...please..." she was begging but she wasn't sure what for. Will seemed to know, however. With a snarl of pure need he pulled away and propelled her off the dance floor, toward the entrance to the club.

Maddy's legs wouldn't support her. She could feel the cramps coming back, the pain and need and desire mixing inside her until she felt ready to explode. "Please,

Will..." she was almost sobbing as she reached for one of the high bar tables to hold herself up.

Will gave her an assessing glance, one side of his mouth pulled down into a fierce frown. "Fine. I wanted to take you someplace private but I guess we'll have to take the edge off here. Bend over the table and lift your skirt."

"What?" Maddy's brain couldn't process what he was saying. She only knew she was in pain, her need as bad as it had been back when Jake had first bred her.

"Here." Will turned her around and pushed her flat across the table, her breasts spilling out of the low-cut dress to rest against the cool dark wood. He tried to push up her skirt but it was stretched too tightly over her ass. Without bothering to ask if it was all right, he grabbed the hem in both hands and yanked.

Maddy heard a ripping sound as the fabric parted. The split at the back of the dress was now much higher, high enough that she could feel cool air against her bare ass.

Will laughed roughly but it wasn't a happy sound. "Well now, I see you're ready for me, sweetheart. No panties."

"What—?" she began and then Will was on his knees behind her, spreading her legs.

All her questions were answered as she felt him part her pussy lips and press his tongue deep into her heated cunt. She moaned at the sudden bolt of pleasure that instantly turned the cramping pain and need into ecstasy. God, he was tasting her—licking her right here in public! But somehow she couldn't make herself care. All that mattered was the dance of his tongue thrusting deeper and deeper inside her and the feel of his fingers spreading her pussy lips to get better access to her slippery folds.

She curled her hands into fists as he pressed her against the table, moaning softly as he forced his way inside her. There was a savage quality to his love that hadn't been there before. A desperation that made him rough. She gasped as his fingers bruised her flesh, spreading her wider for his tongue. He withdrew to nip the tender skin of her inner thighs and then lashed her clit mercilessly, torturing her with pleasure until Maddy cried out, unable to contain herself.

The other shifters were watching them, watching the show they were putting on, and yet she still couldn't bring herself to mind. Deep down was the knowledge that she would be ashamed when it was over but right now nothing was more important than the orgasm she could feel building inside her with each rough thrust of Will's tongue in her cunt.

*Close...God, so close. If he'd only touch me a little bit more...*

It was as though Will could read her thoughts or else he knew her body so well he understood exactly what she needed. Suddenly she felt his fingers stroking roughly over her clit, sending showers of sparks down her spine and through her entire body—giving her exactly what she needed to come.

The orgasm hit her with such force she nearly collapsed. Only Will wrapping an arm around her hips kept her upright as the intense pleasure shot through her.

"God...oh God..." someone was moaning out loud and it was her. Maddy felt like she had the one time she'd gotten blind-drunk in college. Her friends had been forced to carry her out of the bar they were in, because she literally couldn't walk—her legs had been like rubber. Just like they were now.

She was vaguely aware of Will picking her up as the pleasure of the orgasm he had given her receded, but she was too tired to care. The frightening rush of emotions had exhausted her to the point where she never cared if she walked again. She just wanted to rest.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

When Maddy came back to herself they were in Will's car with the windows rolled down. The cold night air brought her back to her senses and she sat up in the passenger seat, taking deep breaths and trying to clear her head.

"What...what the hell was that?" She looked at Will uncertainly. He had a grim expression on his face and he was driving with single-minded attention to the road, not looking at her at all.

"That, sweetheart, was the mating dance. Only it's more than a dance as I tried to warn you."

Maddy felt suddenly put on the defensive. "You didn't try hard enough. What the hell, Will? Why didn't you tell me it would...would affect me the way it did?"

"Because I was hoping it wouldn't," he growled. "The mating circle is one thing but the mating dance is just a prelude. Usually when a female is securely bonded to a male she won't be as susceptible to the effects of the drum's rhythms and the proximity of other males."

"But-but I thought I was bonded to Jake."

"You are. But he's the wrong tribe for you."

"What about you then?" Maddy demanded. "I...we...did things. I thought..."

He gave her a quick glance. "I thought so too. Hoped so, anyway. But it's clear you don't have much of a bond to me at all—not enough to keep your body from responding to outside influences, anyway."

"I can't help that!" she flared, feeling suddenly cornered. "I can't help that I don't feel for you what I feel for Jake and I can't help that my body reacted to that damn dance. I didn't *want* it to, you know. The whole time I was being passed around I was scared to death, hating every minute of it even though I could feel myself—my body, I mean—getting...getting ready. I-I just..." She trailed off, shaking her head. She could feel the sting of hot tears in her eyes but she didn't want to give in to the emotion.

"I know you can't help it. Your body's responses are completely biological—picking your mate is beyond your control." But Will's voice was still stiff and cold, his eyes focused on the blacktop unwinding ahead of them.

"Will—"

"You know Elder Roughhide is finally here from the Bear tribe?" he went on, not looking at her. "That means tomorrow they'll have Jake's sentencing and your mating circle. I was hoping to influence you enough that you would choose me—that your body would pick mine. But I don't think that's going to happen now. Apparently you'd rather have anyone but me."



Maddy felt despair wash over her. "You know," she whispered, "I used to wish I could enjoy sex. I thought I was cold—frigid. But ever since I found out about what I am, I feel like my body is in charge and my mind is just along for the ride. It's so scary. So horrible. I wish...I just wish someone could put me back the way I was."

Even as she spoke she could feel the painful desire building inside her again. Her pussy was throbbing, her nipples tingling. The orgasm Will had given her wasn't going to be enough. She needed more but how could she possibly ask him for it?

Gritting her teeth, she decided to say nothing. Will was being an ass, acting like she could help who her body reacted to. She would bear the pain somehow and to hell with asking him for any more help, the bastard.

They drove the rest of the way in silence, the car's tires crunching on the salt-packed road until they came to her aunt's house, a lovely Victorian with gingerbread trim. There was a light on at the front porch but Maddy was relieved to see the rest of the house was dark. Maybe Vivien had already gone to bed and she wouldn't have to answer any questions.

"Here we are," Will said tonelessly, bringing the car to a stop. "Home sweet home, sweetheart. Now you can sleep in your own little bed. Alone. Which is how you want to be since Jake isn't available, isn't it?"

"Thanks for the ride," Maddy said stiffly, ignoring his jab. The cramps were sharp and severe by now but somehow she was able to force herself to open the door and get out of the car. Trying to stand straight despite the debilitating pain, she walked slowly up the icy sidewalk, the sharp wind cutting through her thin black dress. She vaguely remembered that she had a coat that she'd left in the car when she and Will first went into the casino but she was damned if she'd go back for it now.

*Just need to get inside. Just need to lie down,* she told herself. *Then everything will be fine. I'll be all right.*

She knew it was a lie but she couldn't let herself face the truth—that the heat was on her again with all its blinding pain and demanding desire. At least her body didn't feel wrong and shaky as it had when she'd almost had the uncontrolled change at Jake's cabin. With any luck she'd just have the pain to endure and nothing more. *Like the pain isn't enough,* she thought and bit her lower lip to keep from gasping as another cramp spasmed through her body. *God, that hurts!*

Suddenly strong hands were on her shoulders as Will turned her to face him. "It's back, isn't it?"

"I don't...don't know what you're talking about," Maddy gasped as another bolt of pain shot through her.

"Damn it, Maddy, yes you do. Your heat is back but you weren't going to say anything. You'd rather take the pain than let me breed you, wouldn't you? You'd rather do anything than let me be the one to help you."

She lifted her chin. "You're acting like an asshole. What do you think?"

One corner of his mouth went down violently. "I think I'm not Jake but I'll have to do. Come on." He grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward the house.

Maddy stumbled after him, trying not to cry out as waves of pain washed over her. The wind knifed through her and she felt faint but she kept her eyes on the ground and concentrated on moving without falling over. *Jake would have picked me up and carried me*, a small voice whispered in her head. Deep down she knew that Will would too—if she asked. Maddy lifted her chin. *To hell with him. I'm not asking.*

Somehow she made it to the front door and through the darkened house to her room without falling down. But by the time she collapsed on the bed the pain was coming in blinding bursts, making silent tears roll down her cheeks.

Maddy buried her face in a pillow, not wanting Will to see her weakness. She hated this—hated everything about it. She didn't want to be this vulnerable—this needy and dependant. With Jake it hadn't mattered so much because he'd been kind and comforting through the whole thing. But no words of comfort were coming from Will's direction. He was standing beside the bed stripping in grim silence like a man with an unpleasant job he wants to get over and done with.

She struggled to get out of the constricting black dress, knowing what came next. She needed to be bred and she didn't have the time or the strength to fool herself into thinking she could be careful about it and limit her contact with Will. He was the only male available and he was going to have to fuck her. No matter how her mind felt about it, her body demanded it.

"Will—" she started but he was already behind her on the bed, positioning her roughly on her hands and knees. "What—?" Maddy started again but he cut her off.

"This way's best because you can't see me. Just pretend I'm Jake."

"Will, no. I—"

"Spread wider. Need to get deep in your pussy, sweetheart. Need to fill you full of my cum." He pushed her thighs apart and then she felt the broad, plum-shaped head of his cock pressing against her wet entrance.

"Please!" she gasped, uncertain whether she was begging him to stop or to go on.

Will didn't ask her to explain. Instead he drove into her with a single-minded intensity that made Maddy cry out and struggle to be free.

"Will, please!" she gasped but he didn't withdraw and she felt the sharp sting of his barb engaging.

"Hold still." His voice was cold as he pressed inside her, filling her completely with his thick length. "It'll be over in a minute."

Crying softly, Maddy stopped struggling. There was no use trying to stop him now—his cock was buried to the hilt in her pussy and the situation had to continue to its logical conclusion. The only thing she could do was spread her legs wider and let him finish. But, God, he was cold, so cold inside her.

Closing her eyes tightly, she tried to endure it. There was no love or gentleness in his hard, mechanical thrusts as he pounded into her body. Will was giving her what she needed but there was no emotion in his delivery, no tenderness in their shared intimacy. Only pain and the ache of unwanted pleasure between them. This wasn't making love or sex or even fucking—it was cold, methodical breeding and she hated herself for needing it.

Over and over he thrust into her, filling her relentlessly with his thick length. And despite the emotional distance between them, Maddy could feel her body reacting to what he was doing. Unwanted desire pulled at her, rising as inevitably as the tide until he spilled inside her and her own joyless orgasm peaked sharply, finally stilling the painful need that had consumed her.

"There. Finished," Will growled at last. "Wait for a minute—I'll pull out as soon as I can."

It seemed to take an eternity but at last the barb disengaged. Maddy was still quivering around him when he pulled out of her and went for his clothes. She lay on the bed watching him pull on his pants with quick, savage movements. Though her body was satiated her mind was in turmoil.

"Will," she said softly, trying to catch his eyes with her own. "Do you...do you really hate me that much?"

"Hate you?" He looked at her, his eyes a pale green, not with desire this time but with anguish, Maddy realized. "Of course I don't hate you, Maddy. From the first minute I saw you I felt..." He shook his head. "I don't hate you."

"Then why?" She sat up in bed, still weak but determined to get the truth. "Why treat me like this?"

"Because it should have been *me*." Will stopped dressing and stared at her. "Don't you get it? I was too late. By the time I got to Jake's cabin you'd already bonded with him. But it should have been me."

"I'm sorry." Maddy felt like crying again but she pushed back the tears. "Sorry you can't accept how I feel for Jake."

"It's not how you feel for Jake that bothers me." He sank down on the bed beside her. "I'm a shifter—we're conditioned to share if we have to. I don't mind if you love him—hell, he's my best friend and I love him too. I just...wish you could feel the same for me as you do for him." He ran a hand through his hair. "But you don't. Or at least, your body doesn't—otherwise you wouldn't have reacted so strongly to those other males during the mating dance."

"Will..." Maddy reached for him, putting one hand tentatively on his muscular shoulder. "I know I reacted to them but I didn't want to. And the whole time I was dancing—well, being danced with is probably a better way to put it—I kept thinking how it felt wrong. How all the other men *smelled* wrong. I know that sounds weird but it's true. And when you finally got to me and took me in your arms I was so relieved because you felt right. You smelled right. And I wasn't...wasn't afraid anymore."

She couldn't hold the tears back anymore, she could feel them spilling down her cheeks in hot rivulets of shame and misery. She wrapped her arms around herself protectively and hung her head, giving in to a misery so deep it seemed to swallow her whole.

"God, Maddy, don't do that." Will put his arms around her and pulled her toward him. At first she resisted his touch but then she let herself go, flowing to him, letting him hold her close while the tears came.

"I *do* care, Will," she choked, pressing her face to his bare chest. "I'm sorry what I feel for you isn't the same as what I feel for Jake but I *do* care for you."

"Oh sweetheart." He sighed as he held her. "I'm sorry I treated you the way I did. I ought to be shot. And Jake probably *will* shoot me when he finds out."

Maddy shook her head. "You gave me what I needed. No one can fault you for that."

"I can." Will shook his head. "I practically raped you — there's no excuse."

"Then make it up to me." Maddy wasn't sure why she was saying this, only that it felt right. The pain in his eyes and the feel of his strong arms around her filled her with an emotion she couldn't name.

He shook his head again. "If only I could."

"You can." Maddy looked into his eyes. "Breed me again, Will. Only this time don't just fuck me — make love to me."

"I thought you only wanted Jake." His voice was flat and doubtful.

"I do want Jake." Maddy squeezed her eyes closed for a moment. "God, so much. But...but I want you too. Not just because I need to be bred. Because I care for you. Because I want to feel close to you. Please, Will..."

He lifted her chin and kissed her—a kiss so soft and tender and yet so full of longing it took her breath away. When he pulled away he looked into her eyes for a long moment before whispering, "Are you sure?"

"More than sure." Her fears and discomfort about being with him alone had somehow vanished. And it wasn't that she didn't want Jake anymore—she still felt an empty ache in her heart where he ought to be and no one, not even Will, could fill that spot. But she cared about Will too and she wanted to show him.

He pulled her down on the bed and started to turn her over but Maddy shook her head.

"Face-to-face this time. I want you to know it's *you* I'm seeing and thinking of when you fill me," she whispered.

His eyes glowed softly. "Oh Maddy..."

She mounted him swiftly, more comfortable with this position now that she'd done it several times with Jake. And as she lowered herself down onto him, feeling his thickness breach her entrance once more, Maddy held his gaze with her own.

"Will," she half moaned when he was all the way inside her, the head of his cock pressing hard against the end of her channel and his barb locked in place. "God...feels so good. So right..."

"Ride me." His eyes were blazing now, filled with desire and another emotion she was afraid to name. "Take your pleasure with me, Maddy. I want to see you come, want to watch your face and know it's me you're coming for."

"Yes..." she whispered. "God, yes, Will..." Leaning back to get him as deeply inside her as possible, she braced herself on his muscular thighs and began a slow, rocking rhythm that was the exact opposite of their earlier encounter.

Will gripped her hips with his hands, guiding her gently, letting her ride him as the pleasure mounted for them both. He no longer felt cold inside her—he was warm and alive, full of tenderness and longing so palpable Maddy felt like she could gather the emotions around herself like a quilt. *Will loves me*, she realized as the slow, deep, delicious pleasure built inside her. *He really does—every bit as much as Jake*. It was a strange realization but true, she was certain. After a lifetime of connecting with nobody she suddenly found herself intimately tied to not one but two men, as different as night and day but both equally committed to her for some reason.

And tomorrow she would lose one of them forever.

Maddy pushed the thought away before it could bring tears to her eyes and tried to concentrate on the here and now. She missed Jake but it was Will she was making love with, Will who filled her so beautifully, who held her so tenderly as though she were fine china and might break.

"Are you close, sweetheart? Close to coming for me?" His eyes were burning with need and Maddy supposed her own were as well. She held his gaze as she worked herself on his cock, rocking her way to a peak so sweet she could hardly bear it.

"God, yes, Will," she moaned as he thrust inside her, helping her reach the edge. "Feels so good, so right to have you in me like this."

"For me too, Maddy." His eyes blazed at her. "Come for me. Let me feel you coming while I fuck your sweet pussy."

"Will...oh Will." Maddy felt the orgasm crest inside her. She gasped his name as it washed over her in a soft but intense wave—like being drenched in a warm, gentle rain. It was as different from the orgasm he'd given her earlier as an ice pick is from a feather pillow and it was wonderful.

"Maddy..." He pulled her down to his chest and then rolled them onto their sides, making sure to keep them connected. "God, I love to hear my name on your lips when you come."

She smiled. "I don't mind saying it either. That was incredible."

"Mmm, for me too." He kissed her gently and stroked a strand of her flame red hair away from her eyes. "Maddy, I want you to know something. No matter who you wind up picking tomorrow at the mating circle, I'll still care for you. Still love you."

"Oh Will..." Maddy kissed him back, deeply touched by his words. She hadn't known Will long but she could tell it wasn't easy for him to admit how he was feeling. But his words worried her. "Do I really not have a choice?" she asked, looking up at him. "About who I pick, I mean?"

He shook his head. "Your body will choose for you—you'll be drawn to the most suitable mate for you. That may be a male you're bonded to or to someone completely different—it's impossible to tell until you step into the mating circle."

"I don't like that. What if my body wants someone my mind finds repulsive?" Maddy shivered, remembering some of her dance partners at the club. "What if he's a jerk?"

Will kissed her again. "Believe it or not these relationships usually work out pretty well. It's kind of like an arranged marriage only your body and the drives of the spirit animal inside you are picking your mate instead of your parents doing it. I know it must seem strange but it's the Lynx way and has been for centuries."

Maddy frowned. "I'm getting a little tired of shifter ways and traditions and taboos. I've had my own life for twenty-five years—I'd rather not have someone, or a whole group of someones, telling me how to live it now."

He shrugged. "Sorry, sweetheart. That's kind of part of the deal. You gain a whole tribe of people like you but you get all the baggage that comes with it." He sighed. "I know as a half-breed it was kind of a shock to me too. Sometimes I really think I'm more comfortable in the human world."

"Why join the Lynx tribe at all then?" Maddy asked. "Jake told me you talked your way into it and didn't have to do an initiation like he did. Why bother if you don't like it?"

Will ran a hand through his hair. "It's part of my heritage. And besides, if even a drop of your blood is shifter, you want a shifter mate. I know some males ignore the urge and find a human female they want and I tried that—believe me. But I just can't help myself—I'm drawn to my own kind. Drawn to you, I guess."

"Why me?" Maddy looked at him uncertainly. "This is a big community. There must be plenty of unmated females to choose from."

Will grimaced. "There are and I've dated a few of them. Unfortunately they're almost all like Tamara. Bitchy...skinny...catty. You're *real*, Maddy. I don't have to wonder when you say something if you're being honest and I know exactly where I stand with you. Those qualities, that realness is what draws me to you. That and the fact that you're gorgeous and my body reacts to your scent like crazy." He smiled.

"I-I feel drawn to you too," Maddy admitted. "You and Jake both. But now Jake..." She shook her head, not wanting to go on.

"Jake will be all right." Will stroked her hair. "He's a tough son of a bitch. You know the first time I met him I was defending him—in human court, not the shifter council mind you—for breaking some guy's motorcycle in half?"

"He what?" Maddy found herself grinning. "Why did he do that?"

"It was back when his nephew was younger and this asshole kept driving his motorcycle up and down the street at night, keeping him up. He was falling asleep in school every day—poor kid couldn't keep his eyes open. Jake warned the biker once or twice and the guy blew him off. Finally one night Jake grabbed him off his bike and made sure it wouldn't be a problem anymore."

"How though?" Maddy asked. "I mean, how do you break a motorcycle in two?"

Will shrugged. "He took a sledgehammer to it. And then a chain saw. Actually, it was in more than two pieces when he was done with it. Considerably more."

"And you defended him in court?"

"Got him off with a fine." Will grinned. "We recognized each other right away, of course, and it turned out we had a lot in common. Both half-breeds, both living in between the human and shifter worlds, part of both but not really belonging to either..." He sighed. "The point is, Maddy, Jake's a tough guy. And there's nobody I know who can handle himself better. Plus he's got a pretty good lawyer on his side, if I do say so myself."

Maddy looked at him anxiously. "Do you think you can get him off? I mean, it's so unfair that they should punish him for saving my life."

Will looked troubled. "I'll do my damndest, Maddy—I promise you that. But the Council of Elders is considerably tougher to get around than the human courts. Here you're guilty until proven innocent."

"They won't...they wouldn't kill him—would they?" She could barely get the words out of her mouth but she had to ask, had to voice her worst fear and hope that Will could refute it.

His mouth got tight. "Not outright, no. But there are punishments akin to death in the shifter community. Being flogged with a silver-tipped whip is one—it's hard for a shifter's system to heal the wounds and the microscopic silver residue left behind can kill. You can be branded with silver too, which isn't as deadly since the extreme heat burns away the silver residue and cauterizes the wound. Of course that's mostly done when the guilty party is being Ghosted—in effect, shunned by the entire tribe and cut off from the tribal energy forever."

"Is that really such a bad thing?" Maddy frowned. "I mean, I wasn't raised in any tribe and I never had any problems until I went into heat."

"Well, it's not so much that you need the tribal energy to *live*—it's more like you need it to be fulfilled. To be happy." He looked at Maddy thoughtfully. "Were you happy when Jake found you?"

"No, not at all," she had to admit. "I was pretty miserable but I didn't know why. I mean, I thought it had to do with breaking up with my fiancé but even when I was with him I was never really happy. I guess I just felt...lost."

He nodded. "We don't know why but shifters need to be around their own kind at least part of the time. They can go off on their own if they still have that vital connection

to their tribe but without it they're in trouble. Unless they have a way to deal with it—other shifters who are willing to leave and be cut out of the tribe with them."

"Vivien told me about how her sister—my mom, I guess—wanted to go off on her own and they wouldn't let her."

Will shifted to a more comfortable position. "It's a little different for females because of their heat. They *need* to be with a male, at least once a month because they have to be bred."

"What about females who lose their mates? What do they do?"

"There make arrangements—there are always a few unattached males around who don't mind helping out," Will said. "I've been known to help myself from time to time, which is probably one reason Jake thought to call me for you." He shook his head. "I never thought I'd find the female I wanted to mate that way though."

"So you 'help out', do you?" Maddy felt a little spark of jealousy. "And just how many girls have you helped that way, hmm?"

He grinned at her. "Three. And all of them went on to mate other people. Believe me, Maddy, in those situations it's more of a stopgap method than anything erotic."

She had a sudden thought. "You've never helped Aunt Vivien, have you? Oh my God, please tell me you haven't. That would be too weird."

Will laughed. "Please—Aunt Viv is a sweetheart but I couldn't look at myself in the mirror if I bred her—it just wouldn't be right. No, she's past her fertile years now so she doesn't have to worry about it anymore."

Maddy sighed. "Lucky her. This whole system is just so...so *sexist*."

"It's a biological imperative," Will said seriously. "You'll see tomorrow when you step into the mating circle."

"I don't want to talk about that now." Maddy pressed her face against his muscular chest and breathed in his warm, clean scent. "Just hold me, Will. Help me forget what's going to happen tomorrow."

"I'll try, sweetheart," he murmured, leaning down to kiss the top of her head.

For the rest of the night he did. But no matter how long and sweetly he loved her Maddy couldn't ever quite forget that her world was going to change forever tomorrow.

And once it did, there was no going back.



## Chapter Sixteen

"Are you serious? This is all I get to wear?" Maddy stared down at herself in horror. When Vivien had first handed her the transparently thin white silk robe she'd assumed it was some kind of slip she was supposed to wear under the traditional Lynx mating outfit. She'd never dreamed that it actually *was* the entire outfit.

But Vivien was nodding as she made sure the deep red sash that held the thin robe closed was tied perfectly in front. "This is it."

"But-but it's almost see-through," Maddy protested. "And besides, I thought you said the ceremony was being held outdoors? It's cold out there, Vivien. I mean it's December twenty-fourth."

"Christmas Eve," Vivien said, nodding again. "A lovely date for your mating day, my dear. I've always loved the Christmas season—even if it's not considered as proper as celebrating Winter Solstice by most shifters."

The thought gave Maddy pause. Until she'd met Jake and found out what she was, she'd been resigned to spending the Christmas holiday alone in her apartment. Instead she was dressed in a barely there robe, about to go out in the freezing cold and hitch her destiny to a man she might not even know. It was so different from what she'd expected it was almost surreal.

"Don't worry, my dear," Vivien said comfortingly. "Once the heat of the mating circle hits you, you'll be toasty warm, I promise."

Maddy thought of the unwanted sexual desire that had filled her the night before during the mating dance at the club and shivered. "No thanks. I think I'd rather be cold."

Vivien shook her head and kept helping Maddy get dressed. The footwear that went with the silk robe was a pair of beautifully beaded white leather moccasins that laced up to her knees. It seemed like an odd combination but when she had everything on, it looked right together somehow.

"These are gorgeous," she said, looking down at the moccasins. The leather was butter soft and supple around her feet and calves.

"You're gorgeous, my dear." Vivien's lovely eyes brimmed with tears. "Oh my, I just met you and already I'm going to lose you to some male."

"You won't lose me," Maddy said. She stepped forward and gave her new-found aunt an awkward hug, which Vivien returned eagerly. "No matter who...who I wind up with I promise I'll keep in touch with you." Maddy gave a halfhearted laugh. "In fact, if he turns out to be a jerk I might just move in with you and only see him once a month."

Vivien pulled back and studied her face. "You would be very welcome to do just that. You're always welcome here—this is our home, Madeline, if you ever need one. Please don't forget that."

"I won't." Maddy still felt awkward but it was a good kind of awkward. It was strange, after all these years, to finally have a relative but she found that she liked it a lot.

"Oh, my dear—don't cry." Vivien half laughed through her own tears as she studied Maddy's face. "Mating isn't the end of the world—it's the beginning in a lot of ways."

"I'm not crying," Maddy protested, putting a hand to her cheek. To her surprise her fingertips came back wet. "Well, I'm not crying *much*," she amended, blotting her eyes with the tissue Vivien handed her. "It's just...it's nice to have someone after so many years of being alone."

"I agree." Vivien wiped her own eyes and smiled. "And after this morning you'll have *two* someones. Me and your mate—whatever it is."

"I know who I wish it could be." Maddy looked down, her heart in her throat. *Jake, God I still miss you so much!*

"I know you still care for the Wolf, but you must try to forget him," Vivien said gently. "Today at the trial will be the last time you'll be allowed to see him."

"I still don't think it's fair," Maddy burst out. "Why should I let a bunch of people I don't even know dictate to me on who to love and how I spend my life?"

Vivien looked shocked. "Why, they're not just a bunch of people, my dear, they're the Council of Elders. They have always known what is best for each tribe and all the individuals in that tribe."

"Not this time." Maddy frowned and crumpled the tissue she was holding. "I don't give a damn how wise and wonderful they're supposed to be—I still want Jake."

"If you say that you'll only make it harder for him at the trial," Vivien cautioned her. "Don't make his punishment worse by flaunting your feelings in front of the council."

"I won't." Maddy felt a surge of depression. "I can't believe I finally get to see him again and I can't show him how I feel."

"He knows." Vivien patted her arm. "But the best thing you can do for him is let him be and follow your instincts to another mate. Hopefully you'll wind up with Will—don't you care for him too? He spent the night last night, didn't he?"

Maddy could feel her cheeks getting hot. Will had slipped out early that morning before daybreak. Aunt Vivien must be a light sleeper. "Yes," she admitted at last. "I do care for Will—as much as I care for Jake, in fact. But...but Jake was first. He saved me and I feel like I'm abandoning him. Throwing him to the wolves—literally."

"Oh that's not true. And besides, you're doing the only thing you *can* do by picking another mate from among your own tribe. You can't change tradition," Vivien said

practically. "And believe me, dear, once you enter the mating circle you'll be able to forget about what you feel for him because your body will be completely focused on finding the most suitable mate."

"But how will I know?" Maddy asked despairingly. "I mean, will it just come to me in a flash or what?"

"You'll just know," Vivien said mysteriously. "You'll be drawn to your true mate like a nail to a magnet. There's no avoiding the truth of the mating circle."

"It will really be that clear to me?"

Vivien nodded. "You'll stand in the center of the circle and feel the energy of each male and you'll know which one is right. I can't explain it any better than that except to say that it never fails."

Maddy took a deep breath. "I hope it's Will then. If I can't have Jake. But-but I'm afraid that even having Will won't stop me from wanting Jake. From needing him."

Vivien patted her shoulder. "You think that now but you'd be surprised. You certainly won't be the only young female to enter the mating circle and find a true love completely different from the one she thought she wanted."

"I guess we'll see," Maddy said unhappily. She was sure that what Vivien was saying was true but she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd met Jake first for a reason. If Will had gotten to Jake's cabin in time, it wouldn't even be an issue. She could feel how compatible their bodies were, how right Will was for her. But Jake was right too—and Jake had been there first.

Vivien glanced at her watch. "Oh dear, it's time to go already. And I wanted to fix you a big bowl of my special creamy squash and pistachio oatmeal to keep you warm during the trial and the ceremony."

"Uh, that's okay." Maddy tried not to make a face. "I'm too nervous to eat right now anyway. I'll just wear a coat until the ceremony instead."

"All right. Oh—I have just the thing." Running to the walk-in closet that had been Maddy's mother's, Vivien rummaged around for a few minutes and reappeared holding an ankle-length fur coat. "This should keep you warm until it's time to step into the mating circle."

"I guess so." Maddy reached out to touch the fur. "Um, if you don't mind me asking, what kind of fur is this?"

"Lynx, of course," Vivien said and then laughed at Maddy's shocked expression. "Oh don't worry, my dear. The coat isn't made of dead shifters. We revere our ancestral totem animal and we're very careful not to overhunt but it's better to keep the wild lynx population down since they're competition for our hunting grounds."

"I see." Maddy allowed Vivien to slip the luxurious fur coat over her shoulders. "Well, I guess we'd better get going."

"I guess we should." Vivien nodded and took her arm. "Come on, dear. You'll see—it won't be so bad."

Maddy nodded but despite Vivien's kind words she was terribly afraid that what she was about to witness and participate in would be every bit as bad as she anticipated.

Every bit as bad and worse.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wow, so this is the great outdoors." Maddy looked around the enclosed area they were standing in. It more closely resembled a small but plush sports stadium than the clearing in the woods she'd been imagining when Vivien had told her both Jake's trial and her own mating ceremony would be held outside. The pale early morning light poured in, making everything look slightly blue around the edges, and she found herself shivering despite the lynx fur coat.

"It's open to the sky, dear—that's what counts." Vivien squeezed her arm and smiled. All around them the stadium-style seats were being filled with shifters. Maddy felt herself reflected in their eyes and tried not to see the mixture of condemnation and curiosity on the strange but familiar faces.

*I don't know these people. And no matter what they say, they don't have the right to judge me,* she told herself firmly, keeping her chin high. She wished she could blend in more—sitting on the very front row, even with the long fur coat covering her skimpy white robe, made her feel conspicuous.

"Oh look—there are the elders!" Vivien pointed, dragging her attention from the curious crowd to the center of the round inner space of the stadium. A carved wooden table and three chairs sat there and in the chairs were three of the oldest people Maddy had ever seen.

She wondered, as she scanned their seamed and wrinkled faces, what made them qualified to judge her and decide what was best for her life. It was like suddenly having three strict, elderly grandparents who had complete control of her destiny. Maddy didn't like it a bit but there didn't seem to be anything she could do about it. She was trapped here, both by her body's new biological needs and by her wish to defend Jake. If they thought they could sentence him to some horrible punishment for saving her life they were dead wrong. Maddy wasn't sure what she could do but she was determined to try to keep him from harm's way.

The elders—two men and a woman—were speaking in low voices to each other as the crowd settled down. The older man was wearing what looked like a bearskin jacket—that would be Elder Roughcoat of the Bear tribe, the one they'd been waiting on in order to hold the trial. The other man had on a necklace of sharp canine teeth that had obviously belonged to an animal. *Wolf's teeth, maybe?* Maddy watched him for a moment. His features were more clearly Native American than either of the others and he wore his salt-and-pepper hair long, tied with a piece of twine at the back of his neck. *That must be the Wolf elder, Elder SharpTooth,* she decided.

The third elder, and the only woman, had to be Lynx by default but Maddy felt she would have known that even without the process of elimination. Unlike the other two elders, who were dressed in what appeared to be tribal attire, Elder Elise was wearing a smartly tailored black business suit that screamed haute couture. Her jewelry looked expensive too. *No animal tooth necklace for her*, Maddy thought, studying the simple yet elegant strand of creamy pearls that encircled Elder Elise's wrinkled neck. Her pure white hair was piled high on her head in an elaborate updo and she had a pair of black-rimmed spectacles perched on the end of her aristocratic nose. All in all, she looked like she could give Tamara lessons in bitchiness—not a good sign as far as Maddy was concerned.

"I think we're about to get started," Vivien whispered.

"How do you know?" Maddy asked. Just then a hush fell over the crowd. Maddy turned to see where everyone was looking and her heart leapt up and lodged in her throat. *Jake!* She wanted to shout his name out loud but she forced herself to keep silent and watch as he was led to stand in front of the Elders' table.

He was wearing the same clothes she'd last seen him in—jeans and a tight-fitting black T-shirt—and his hair was a wild tangle. Beard stubble covered his strong jaw and there were shadows under his piercing blue eyes, as though he hadn't been sleeping well.

*Of course he hasn't been sleeping well—he's being treated like a criminal!* Maddy felt a surge of indignation at all the casually elegant people around her. How dare they sit back in their designer fashions and judge Jake? And couldn't they at least have let him have a shower and a change of clothes before they put him on trial?

Jake was followed by his glowering older brother, Rich, who looked about as comfortable as a Rottweiler in a room full of mountain lions. And behind him came Will, dressed impeccably in an expensive-looking dark gray suit and blood red tie. Maddy's heart surged again when she saw him, looking so professional and handsome. There was a grim look on his face—the expression of a good attorney who knows his client is innocent and is determined to prove it.

*I just hope he can!* Maddy squeezed her hands into fists inside the long sleeves of the fur coat, trying to calm her anxiety. Vivien patted her shoulder comfortingly and she spared her aunt a quick smile of gratitude before returning to the scene in front of the Elders' table.

"Jacob Redthorn," Elder Elise said in a stern voice. "You stand accused of breaking the most important and sacred taboo of the shifter people—you have dared to breed a female that is not of your tribe."

"This is a very serious offense—one this Council does not take lightly," Elder RoughCoat continued where the Lynx elder had left off. "We are here to determine what punishment fits your crime."

"To think that a Wolf would shame his tribe like this—it is something I hoped never to see in my long lifetime. I'm truly sorry to be here under these circumstances," said Elder SharpTooth, shaking his head.

"Jake is sorry to be here under these circumstances too," Will said, stepping forward. "But I want to stress to the Council that he didn't set out to break the taboo. He actually called me out the night in question and asked *me* to come service the female shifter he had found living among the humans." Will lifted his chin. "If anything, I share Jake's blame because I wasn't fast enough in getting to him and Maddy."

"Maddy, is it?" Elder Elise frowned, peering through her spectacles to where Maddy sat in the crowd. "Is that her there?"

"Yes, I'm Madeline Grant," Madeline said before Will could answer for her. She stood up on shaky legs, trying not to think about the fact that every eye in the place was trained on her. "And if you don't mind, I'd like to say something on Jake's behalf."

"Very well, child. Step forward." Elder SharpTooth beckoned to her and Maddy found herself leaving her seat to stand between Will and Jake. Just being close to both of them made her feel better—stronger somehow. She wanted to give Jake a hug but she was sure that would be frowned upon. So she contented herself with brushing the back of his hand unobtrusively with her own. Even that small touch sent a tingle up her arm, reminding her of their first-ever handshake outside the hospital. Maddy found it hard to believe that had been less than a week ago—so much had happened since then it seemed like years.

"Well? Speak up if you have anything to say," snapped Elder Elise.

"I..." Maddy cleared her throat. This was all moving so *fast*. No one had even asked Jake how he pled to the charges against him. She remembered Will saying that under shifter law you were guilty until proven innocent but it was only now sinking in.

"Well?" the Lynx elder said again.

Maddy lifted her chin. "I-I just want to say that Jake did what he did to save me. He told me again and again that it was taboo for him to...help me the way he did. But when it came down to either saving my life or letting me die, he chose to save me even though he knew he'd have to pay the price later."

Elder Elise frowned. "So you're saying you're complicit in what happened? We were told that Jake acted on his own."

"I did." Jake stepped forward hastily. "None of this is Maddy's fault. It's all on me, okay?"

"Jake—" she protested but he shook his head and gave her a warning look.

"I think what Maddy is trying to say is that she's grateful that Jake was willing to put her life above his honor," Will said smoothly, stepping in front of both of them.

"And you think that excuses this reprehensible behavior?" Elder Elise demanded.

Maddy couldn't hold herself back any longer. "What's reprehensible about making love with someone you care about?" she demanded, stepping out from behind Will. "I

know I wasn't raised as a shifter—I never even knew what I was until Jake recognized me and warned me I was going into heat. But I don't understand why an outdated law based on an ancient legend should keep people who want to be together apart in today's world."

Elder RoughCoat frowned. "Young lady, you haven't been part of shifter society for even a month yet and already you dare to criticize our laws and traditions?"

Maddy bit her lower lip. This wasn't going well at all and she suddenly remembered that she could make things worse for Jake if she wasn't careful. "I didn't mean it that way, exactly," she said hastily. "It's just that... Look, as I understand it, the whole reason behind this taboo is that members of two different tribes are usually infertile when they mate. So if intertribal mating was allowed all the tribes would eventually die out for lack of children—right?" Out of the corner of her eye she could see Will shaking his head but she wanted to make her point. "Well, that doesn't have to be a problem anymore," she continued hurriedly. "I mean, with the advances in fertility medicine, in vitro fertilization—"

"Are you suggesting that we shifters go to human clinics and allow them access to our bodies?" Elder Elise demanded. "Do you know what they would do to us if they found out what we are and what we can become? We'd be hunted down! Killed—"

"You don't have to go to a human fertility clinic," Maddy interrupted. "You've got plenty of money to build your own clinic. Look at this place—you're all living in million-dollar homes and driving luxury cars. Why not spend some money on something that counts—on the future and fertility of your race if you're so worried about it? I mean—"

"I think we are getting far off point here." Elder SharpTooth raised a wrinkled hand, cutting her off. "We're not questioning the truth of the tribal taboo—it has proved itself true over the ages. The reason we are here is to punish Jake Redthorn for breaking it."

"We don't deny that the taboo was broken," Will said quickly. "But we would ask for leniency in your sentencing since Jake had no choice in the matter."

"No choice, hmm?" Elder Elise raised one eyebrow. "Let me tell you something, young man, in matters of right and wrong there is *always* a choice."

"But—" Maddy started. But Will put a hand on her arm and shook his head.

"Let's hear what happened from the accused," Elder SharpTooth said. He peered at Jake, frowning. "Why did you do it, Jake? I always thought you were a good boy—even if you are a half-breed."

Jake shrugged. "I did what I had to do, Elder. Maddy here was at the crisis point and going into an uncontrolled change. There was no one else to take care of her. Besides..." He took a step toward her and put an arm around Maddy's shoulders. "I love her. I had to help her anyway I could."

The old man shook his head, looking sorrowful. "I'm sorry to hear you admit to such a thing, Jake. You know how wrong it is to have these kinds of feelings for someone of a different tribe."

"I know." Jake nodded. "It's not something I planned – it just happened."

"And *that* appears to be your excuse for this whole mess – it just happened." Elder Elise glared at him.

"In Jake's defense, he *did* try to turn Maddy's affections from himself to me when I arrived on the scene," Will said. "Unfortunately she had already bonded to him and he was unsuccessful." His face was like a stone when he spoke – utterly expressionless. Maddy felt as if someone had grabbed her heart and squeezed. Even after last night Will still thought she didn't care for him like she did for Jake. Which wasn't true. She cared about both of them in different ways. It was just that Jake had been first, that was all.

"Step forward, Madeline." Elder SharpTooth beckoned to Maddy to come up to the edge of the table. Leaning forward, all three of the elders inhaled, obviously sniffing her scent. To Maddy the bizarre ritual seemed to take forever but at last they sat back, nodding, and she was allowed to go back to her place between Will and Jake.

"We can smell the truth of your statement, William," Elder Elise said. "However, the fact that you bred the girl after Jacob doesn't erase the wrongness of his initial act. In my opinion the old ways are best – the penalty for breaking the taboo and shaming his tribe should be as it was in the days of our ancestors – death."

Maddy grabbed Will's arm. "You said they wouldn't kill him!"

He shook his head and spoke under his breath. "Wait for the other elders to speak. It has to be a unanimous decision."

"I find that penalty too harsh, especially considering the boy saved the life of one of your tribe, Elise." Elder SharpTooth shot the Lynx elder a level glance. "It seems to me at least a little gratitude is in order."

"Why? Because he brought us a new member? A tainted female with loose morals?" Elder Elise gave Maddy a scathing look. "She's useless to us. She hasn't been raised in the Lynx traditions and her fertility isn't even proven."

Maddy opened her mouth to protest but Jake beat her to it.

"Maddy is *not* a female of loose morals. She's a lady and the woman I love."

"I care for her too – deeply. And with all due respect, I will not hear her spoken of like that," Will said, frowning.

"I'll speak however I please." Elder Elise's eyes flashed pale green for a moment behind her black-framed glasses. "And you'll both do well to remember who holds the power here."

"We of the Wolf tribe have too few members as it is," Elder SharpTooth said sharply. "We can't afford to lose one just so you Lynxes can prove a point, Elise. A light whipping with silver should more than teach Jake his lesson."



"How dare you? I am an equal member of this council and I will not sit here and listen to you —"

"Perhaps some time to reflect would help us reach a decision." Elder RoughCoat's voice was louder than Maddy would have thought possible for such a tiny old man. "We can confer during the mating ceremony and give our decision after it's done."

"Agreed." Elder SharpTooth nodded.

"Agreed," Elder Elise said waspishly. "But don't think having more time to think about it will change my mind. The Wolf deserves to die."

Maddy's heart was in her throat again. "Oh Jake," she whispered, reaching for his hand.

"Don't worry about me, darlin'. I'll be fine." He tried to give her a brave smile but Maddy could tell he was worried. *Of course he's worried – that Lynx bitch wants to see him dead for saving my life!* She felt an impotent surge of rage at the thought. How could she watch the man she loved be condemned to death for saving her life? And how could she go through this crazy mating ceremony and be joined to someone else while his fate hung in the balance?

But already she was being pulled away by Vivien, who must have left her seat when Maddy wasn't looking. Jake stayed by the Elders' table, flanked on either side by guards. The look he gave her was longing but hopeless.

Maddy was suddenly blinded by hot tears. Even if they let Jake live, now came the time when she would be parted from him forever. How had this moment come so fast? "Jake," she whispered, trying not to sob aloud.

"It's all right, dear. It'll be all right." Vivien patted her shoulder comfortingly but there was a worried look in her eyes. Maddy remembered that she had been through all this before—or something very similar to it with her sister—Maddy's mother. *And look how well that turned out, whispered a snide little voice in her head. Both your biological parents dead and you left an orphan, not even knowing who or what you are. Oh sure, everything is just peachy.*

Maddy tried to push the thought out of her head but it just wouldn't go. It was becoming increasingly clear to her that under the thin outer coat of civilization and privilege, the shifter world was a savage one. It was a world she wasn't sure she wanted to be part of anymore. Not that she had a choice.

While she was busy trying to hold back her tears Vivien was leading her to one side of the elders' table to what looked like a large, flat rock. The rest of the pseudo stadium was carpeted in Astroturf and the rock looked strange and out of place in the middle of all the fake bright green turf. Maddy didn't have much time to think about it though before Vivien helped her step up on it.

"Who brings this female to be mated?" said a smooth voice that Maddy recognized at once. Sure enough, when she looked up she saw Simon standing to one side of the flat rock, an insincere smile covering his smug face.

"I do," Vivien said, raising her voice so that her words carried to the listening shifters in the audience. "I hold Madeline Grant in high regard and I vouch for her to all assembled."

"Very well then." Simon nodded. "Then we may begin. May the sacred magic of the mating circle choose the male that is right for her. Let all who wish to be considered assemble."

There were ripples of movement in the crowd as various Lynx males began to come down out of the stands. Maddy barely noticed them—she was still filled with misery, her eyes fixed on Jake who was outside the ring of males that was forming around the flat rock where she stood. *Jake, oh Jake!* She blinked hard, trying not to cry.

Her tears were interrupted when Vivien abruptly stripped the ankle-length lynx coat from her shoulders.

"Hey—it's c-cold out here!" Maddy's teeth were already chattering like castanets.

"You'll be warm enough soon, I promise you," Vivien said grimly. "Just look at all the males that want you—their energy will have you hot in no time."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Maddy muttered, looking around. Ten or twelve Lynx males, Will among them, were now assembled in a rough circle around the flat rock she stood on. Some were taking off their shirts and some were already shirtless. She recognized several as the ones she'd danced with the night before—especially the big blond shifter who had been her first partner.

"Hey, sweet thing." He caught her eye and winked, licking his lips in a slow, lascivious way that made Maddy feel sick to her stomach. She looked away quickly.

"Why are they all half undressed?" she asked Vivien in a low voice.

"To let you feel their power. The mating urge is strongest when you have the fewest clothes on. Here." Vivien reached for the scarlet sash that held Maddy's thin silk robe closed and pulled it off in one movement.

"Are you crazy?" Maddy grabbed for the sash as her robe swung open but Vivien held it just out of reach.

"This is the way the ceremony is," her aunt explained calmly. "Consider yourself lucky you get to keep the robe, dear. In my day you had to be stark naked before it could start. Besides, the sash serves a whole different purpose now."

"What purp—" Maddy started but Vivien was already standing on her tiptoes to tie the sash around her eyes. *Great, I'm half naked and blindfolded in the middle of a bunch of horny shifters and I'm supposed to pick one.* Maddy wished she'd taken a better look at where Will was standing in the circle. To hell with letting her spirit animal choose—she wanted to be sure she ended up with a man she wanted. And she sure as hell had no interest in any of the men she'd danced with the night before. *Will was over to the left. If I can just aim myself in the right direction,* she was thinking when Vivien grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around three times in succession.

"Now," she whispered in Maddy's ear. "Open yourself to the energy around you. Don't try to use your senses – they will fail you every time. Just feel the waves of energy coming toward you and follow the one that feels right to your true mate."

The words *that's crazy* were on the tip of Maddy's tongue but she swallowed them back with difficulty. Crazy or not, she was stuck with this process. And if she discounted what Vivien was telling her to do and just went blundering around blindfolded she was liable to grab some jerk by accident and be tied to him the rest of her life.

So instead of listening to the little voice inside her head that was screaming for her to run away as fast as she could, she closed her eyes behind the blindfold and took a deep, calming breath. *Breathe...breathe...you can do this. They've been doing it like this for hundreds of years so there has to be some validity in it. Doesn't there?*

Somewhere outside the circle a lone drumbeat had begun to sound. It reminded Maddy of the drums at the mating dance the night before and she listened to it, trying to breathe to its rhythm.

Fighting back the panic, she forced her shoulders to relax and let her fists uncurl. The process reminded her of the one yoga class she'd taken in college – now she wished she hadn't decided to drop it. All that "seeing with your third eye" had sounded like crap at the time but now Maddy felt like she'd give anything for another sense to lead her to the man she loved and needed. The only man she could have – Will.

As though in answer to her silent wish, she began to feel something. At first it was just a tickle against her shivering skin but then it began to grow. *Heat. It's heat*, Maddy thought incredulously. And it was true – she was being bathed with heat from all directions, as though she was encircled by her own private collection of miniature suns, each vying with the others to send her the most warmth.

*Heat*, she thought again. *But...it's not all the same.* And it wasn't. As she concentrated on being open, she began to perceive subtle differences in the waves of warmth that were rolling toward her from all directions. The heat coming at her from head on had a prickliness to it, like embracing a cactus. *Ugh, not that one!* Instinctively she took a quarter turn to the right, aligning herself with a different wavelength. This one left a metallic tang in her mouth, like sucking on iron filings. *No, absolutely not!*

Maddy turned again and again...each time the heat she felt was accompanied by some other sensation – a taste, a feeling, a scent – but none of them were quite right. None of them were what she wanted. Finally she found a good wavelength – a gentle, warming heat that was accompanied by a cool sensation. It was as though she'd been hiking all day in the desert and suddenly found herself in the middle of an oasis. There was truth, joy and abundant love flowing from the oasis – a place of refuge, a place of peace and acceptance. *Yes*, she thought with relief. *That's it – that's the one.*

She stepped off the flat rock, feeling carefully with one moccasined foot for the ground, seeking the source of the good heat. But the moment she took a few steps forward she felt something else – a heat that was even stronger and better.

*What?* Maddy turned instinctively toward the new sensation. This heat was longing, enveloping and so strong that it caught her attention and made her stop in her tracks. It was a crackling fire on a snowy afternoon, the feel of a handmade quilt wrapped around her shoulders, the creamy taste of hot chocolate in her mouth. But it was more than that—under the comforting sensations was a protectiveness, a willingness to sacrifice everything to keep her safe, a love so fierce, so overpowering, so real, that it drowned out every other contender in the mating circle.

*That one!* Maddy changed directions and almost ran toward the source of the heat. She didn't care that she was blindfolded and couldn't see where she was going, didn't care that the white silk robe was flapping open, showing her breasts and the V of her sex—she was sure if she could just get close enough to the male that was emitting that heat, he would catch her if she fell. He would catch her and love her and keep her safe forever if only she could reach him...

Dimly she could hear that the drumbeat had stopped and people were muttering and whispering in the crowd. But none of it mattered—nothing mattered but getting to the heat—getting to her male, her mate, the man she wanted to be with forever.

Her forward progress was abruptly stopped by a hard male chest. Maddy stumbled and nearly fell but strong hands grabbed her arms, holding her up. Without hesitation she threw her own arms around his waist, pressing her face against the warm, muscular planes of his body and breathing in his scent. It was familiar and comforting in her nose and she knew she had finally come home. Her body throbbed and ached with need and all she could think of was getting her new mate somewhere private to seal the deal, to make him hers and give herself to him completely.

All her earlier apprehension was gone, erased by the feeling of complete and utter rightness, the knowledge that this was the one she was supposed to be with. The man she was going to spend the rest of her life with.

Maddy couldn't wait.

With trembling hands she reached up and yanked the scarlet sash from around her eyes, blinking in the suddenly blinding light. She looked up into her new mate's face.

"Hello, darlin'," said a deep, familiar voice.

It was Jake.

## Chapter Seventeen

"Jake?" Maddy looked up at him in confusion. "But I thought...how did you get in the mating circle?"

"I didn't. You ran right through it and found me." He nodded back the way she'd come and Maddy looked over her shoulder to find that the circle of bare-chested men around the flat rock was a good twenty yards away. Jake was right, she had bypassed all of them to find him, had ignored every man who was supposed to be suitable for her in favor of the one man who suited her absolutely. Jake.

For a moment she felt a surge of triumph. *The mating circle never lies. They'll have to let me be with Jake now!* But then her eyes caught Will's. He was standing on the edge of the circle watching her and there was such desolation in his gaze that it hurt Maddy's heart to see it. *Oh Will...I'm so sorry...* She wanted to say the words aloud but before she could open her mouth Vivien was at her side.

"Madeline—my dear—what did you do?" She gave Jake a quick, scandalized look before returning her attention to Maddy. "You were headed right for Will and I was so happy for both of you and then you just changed course and ran straight out of the circle. Why did you do it?"

"I didn't know I was doing it," Maddy said truthfully. "I just did what you said—I followed the source of the energy that felt right to me and it led me to Jake."

"Is that truly what happened?" The voice belonged to Elder SharpTooth who was looking at her earnestly, his pale old man's eyes troubled.

Maddy stepped around Jake to face the elders' table. "Yes, it—" Realizing she was flashing them, she pulled the thin white silk robe closed and hastily belted the scarlet sash around her waist again. "Yes, Elder SharpTooth, that is truly what happened," she finished when she was decent again.

"She's lying," Elder Elise spat, giving Maddy a scathing look. "No true Lynx would be drawn to a Wolf over her own kind."

"You saw the way Vivien turned me around before the ceremony started," Maddy said evenly. "I was completely disorientated. I followed my instincts to my true mate. Now, I'm sorry if you don't like it but I was told the mating circle cannot lie and that the results can't be faked."

"This is disturbing...most disturbing." Elder RoughCoat shook his head. "Never has a mating circle produced this result. It's...blasphemy."

"It's biology." Will was suddenly there, still shirtless, speaking to the elders. "Jake was the first to breed Maddy and she bonded to him. It's not surprising at all that she should still desire him above anyone else."

"Will..." Maddy put out a hand to him but he shook his head.

"It's okay, sweetheart. You followed your instincts and they led you to Jake."

"It most certainly is *not* all right," snapped Elder Elise. "Are we going to allow this evil to take place right in front of us? So what if the girl has bonded to the Wolf—make her break the bond and choose another—if anyone wants her after this, that is."

"No—that was what you did to my little sister—to Madeline's mother." Vivien shouldered her way through to the front of the elders' table angrily. "You forced her to break her bonds with her true mate, Grant, and what good did it do? Grant died and Gwen was Ghosted and sent out into the human world alone and pregnant. That's right—she was pregnant!" she nearly yelled at Elder Elise who was staring at her in disbelief.

Maddy was shocked herself. She'd never dreamed that mild-mannered Vivien had it in her to go off on the elders. But now that she had started, she showed no sign of stopping.

"She had a baby all by herself in the human world and died because there were no other shifters to help her," Vivien continued hotly. "That baby was Maddy. And then *she* nearly died because she didn't know what she was until Jake warned her she was going into heat. How many more of our people have to die to preserve our way of life? We're so worried about our taboos and traditions, so concerned with keeping our tribes from dying out that we're losing sight of what it all costs. Maddy's spirit animal chose Jake—they should be allowed to stay together. And that's...that's all I have to say." She took a step backward from the table and nodded nervously. Obviously her outburst had surprised her as well.

Maddy squeezed her aunt's hand. "Thanks, Aunt Vivien."

"You're welcome, dear." Vivien gave her a tremulous smile. "I'm not sure what came over me. I wanted you to end up with Will so much but..." She shook her head. "I guess that wasn't to be."

"I guess not." Maddy felt another wave of sadness overcome her. Even standing beside Jake, protected by his warmth, she felt somehow...incomplete. She'd been expecting to have the waves of need and lust overcome her again after the mating ceremony was complete and she found her true mate but somehow the aching desire she'd felt when she was running toward Jake in the first place had melted away to be replaced by a different kind of ache—a feeling like a piece of her was missing. She thought with longing of the cool oasis of love and caring she'd felt coming from Will while she was in the mating circle. It had been a wonderful feeling—but Jake's claim on her heart was first. Still, if only...

*If only what, Maddy?* she asked herself angrily. *You can only have one and the one you picked was Jake.* Still, her eyes kept returning to Will's straight, proud figure. There was desolation in his deep green eyes but here he was, standing in front of the elders and fighting for her to be with Jake even though Maddy knew it was tearing him apart

inside. Speaking of which, the elders, who had been whispering among themselves for the last few minutes, seemed to have reached some kind of decision.

"Very well," Elder SharpTooth said, staring at Maddy and Jake gravely. "It is the decision of this council that the bond between the Wolf, Jake Redthorn and the Lynx, Madeline Grant, is not to be broken."

"Wow – really?" Maddy couldn't believe it was that simple. She felt for Jake's hand and squeezed it tightly. "You're really going to let us be together – despite the taboo?"

"Most certainly, my dear." There was an unpleasant gleam in Elder Elise's sharp gray eyes. "You and your Wolf can go in peace and live together forever – *if* you agree to share his fate."

Maddy's heart was suddenly in her mouth. "His fate?"

"His punishment," Elder RoughCoat clarified. "Mating circle chosen or not, Jake must still be punished for breaking the taboo in the first place."

"You're asking Maddy if she's willing to die for her love?" Will asked harshly, stepping forward.

"Not die – there'll be no killing here today. No matter how richly deserved it might be." Elder Elise raised her voice, addressing the audience as well as the little group in front of the elders' table. "The Council has decided – after much debate – that Jake Redthorn shall be branded with silver and Ghosted from his tribe. From this day forth he will be dead to his people and no shifter shall talk to him or deal with him for however long he may live."

There was a collective gasp from the assembled Lynxes but Jake stood firm. "I accept my fate," he said. "But you can't ask Maddy to share it with me."

"We can and do, Jake," Elder SharpTooth said gravely. "If she wants to be with you, Maddy must agree to follow you into exile." He looked at Maddy. "Think about it, child – do you really want to be cut off from your tribe, from the family that you have only so recently found? It's not too late – you can still choose another more suited for you. A Lynx male to love and care for you, one who retains his status in the Lynx tribe."

As he spoke, a guard appeared from somewhere in the rear of the stadium holding something that looked like an iron poker in his hand. He came around the side of the elders' table and held it out for their inspection. With a start, Maddy realized what he was holding wasn't a poker but a branding iron. And the tip of it, which was shaped like a circle with a line through it, was glowing red hot.

"The sign of the moon crossed out," Vivien murmured in a horrified tone. "To wear it on your skin means that you're no longer a child of the moon. Oh Maddy!"

"Brand's hot, Elder Elise," the guard said unnecessarily. "Who goes first?"

"That depends on what Madeline here decides." The Lynx elder gave her a look that was pure malevolence. "Well? It's time for you to choose, Madeline. You can have a hot branding iron and exile with the male you *claim* to love... Or you can stay in the

tribe like a good little girl and pick a male from the mating circle to be your mate. What's it to be?"

Maddy looked at the glowing, cherry red tip of the branding iron and felt her stomach turn over. God, could she really go through with this to be with Jake? The Ghosting didn't really scare her – she'd been in exile all her life and now that she'd been introduced to her extended tribal family she didn't much care for them. Well, except for Will and Vivien, that was. But she was pretty sure they would both still acknowledge her and Jake, even if they were Ghosted. The branding iron though... *That's going to hurt like hell*, Maddy thought, feeling sick. *And where do they brand you, anyway? On the arm? On the face?*

But despite her fear, the pull toward Jake was stronger. The feeling that they were meant to be together and that, if she gave up on them now she would regret it forever, was impossible to ignore or deny.

"I'll go with Jake," she heard herself saying. "We're supposed to be together. I'll pay the price to be with him if I have to."

"Maddy, no!" Jake grabbed her upper arms and swung her around to face him. "Listen to me, darlin', you do this and there's no going back. I don't want this kind of life for you and I sure as hell don't want to see you branded. Go with Will – he loves you too – he'll take care of you."

"I love Will too," Maddy said calmly. "I care about him as deeply as I care for you, Jake. But, well, you were first and I *have* to be with you. If that means being exiled from my tribe and," she swallowed hard, forcing herself to continue, "and being branded, then I'm willing to do that."

"Maddy –" he began, his pale blue eyes filled with anguish, but Elder Elise cut him off.

"You heard the girl – brand her first."

"Yes, Elder." The Lynx guard grabbed Maddy's upper arm and yanked her away from Jake. "Where should the brand be placed?"

The Lynx elder grinned evilly. "Somewhere no other shifter can miss it, I think – her face. The left cheek should do nicely. Do be careful not to slip and get her eye though – it would be tragic if she wound up blind as well as disfigured."

"No!" Jake roared and surged forward but he was suddenly surrounded by three or four other Lynx guards, all of them holding him back.

"It's all right, Jake." Maddy tried to keep her voice calm but all she could see was the glowing brand coming toward her face – all she could feel was the sizzling heat of the burning silver iron about to kiss her cheek. She steeled herself not to flinch but it was one of the hardest things she'd ever done. *That brand is a good two inches wide*, she thought in a strange, detached way. *How the hell am I going to explain it the day after tomorrow when I go back to work? I know – I'll say it's a Christmas present from the family I never knew I had that found me and has already kicked me out again. Talk about dysfunctional. Yeah, that'll go over really well in the ER...*



"Stop!" Will's voice rang out, shattering the tense silence. "Stop the branding—there is another way."

"You lie, William Tanner. There is no other way," Elder Elise said sharply. "Proceed with the branding."

"Jake and Maddy don't have to be Ghosted if they agree to leave under their own volition and swear never to contact their tribes again." Will's voice was almost desperate now. "Voluntary exile—it's been done before. I can cite precedents if you like, Elders."

"Stop for a moment." Elder SharpTooth made a gesture at the guard who was about to brand Maddy. To her intense relief, the guard lowered the brand though he kept a tight grip on her arm.

"Why did you stop him?" Elder Elise demanded. "You know very well the precedents he's taking about only apply if there is a party of at least three shifters who are leaving to form their own outside tribe."

"She's right," Elder RoughCoat said, looking at Will. "And in this case there are only two—Jake Redthorn and Madeline Grant."

"There are three," Will said steadily. "I'm going with them. It takes three souls to form a tribe and I'm the third."

There was murmuring from the shifters in the stands and Vivien said, "Oh Will—you don't mean it."

"I *do* mean it." Will turned to face Maddy. "I'd like to come with you—if you'll have me."

"Will, buddy...you don't have to do this." Jake's deep voice shook. "This is...I know we're best friends but—"

"I'm not just doing this for you," Will said sharply. He looked at Maddy. "I'm doing it for her too. If this is the only way I can have her, well—I'd rather share than lose out entirely." He stepped forward and cupped Maddy's cheek in his palm. "And I can't stand to see her hurt."

"Will..." Maddy leaned in to his touch, feeling the tingle of contact that let her know he was a male her body wanted and needed. "Jake is right—you don't have to do this," she whispered.

"But I want to." He kissed her gently on the lips and then looked up at Jake. "Will you have me?"

"Gladly," Jake said with no hesitation at all. "But think about it, Will—you'll be giving up a lot more than Maddy and me. You won't be able to practice as a shifter advocate anymore. Or inherit your share of the casino. Or—"

Will held up a hand to stop him. "I know perfectly well what I'm giving up, Jake. And none of it compares to what I'm gaining." He gave the guard who was still gripping Maddy's arm a hard look. "You want to take your hands off my mate? *Both* my mates," he added, frowning at the guards who were still holding Jake.

Reluctantly, the guard holding the branding iron dropped Maddy's arm and Will pulled her close, looping a proprietary and protective arm around her waist. Jake shook free of the suddenly loosened grip of the other guards and came to join them, putting his own arm around Maddy's shoulders.

"Well?" Will looked at the Council of Elders. "Will you grant our request?"

Elder SharpTooth sighed. "It seems to me that we have no choice."

"What? Are you serious?" Elder Elise demanded. "You think we should let them all go free—just let them walk away after all this?"

"I think it's clear that they are meant to be together," Elder RoughCoat said slowly, as though thinking everything out as he talked. "The mating circle cannot lie. And besides—if the Lynx female has a Lynx mate as well as a Wolf mate, the taboo won't truly be broken. As long as she promises to breed with both of them, that is." He shot a sharp-eyed glance at Maddy. "Do you, child?"

Maddy felt a flutter in the pit of her stomach. Breed with both of them. To take both Jake and Will inside her, to let them fill her, fuck her—yes, that was exactly what she wanted. What her body craved no matter how hard it was to admit it. Being with both of them she finally felt complete. "Yes," she said, lifting her chin. "Yes, I promise."

"Very well then, the Bear tribe has no interest in further punishment or prosecution of this case." Elder RoughCoat rubbed his palms together. "I wash my hands of it."

"I as well." Elder SharpTooth copied his motion.

Elder Elise was not so easily appeased. "Stop! What about the original sentence? None of this cancels the fact that Jake Redthorn broke the taboo in the first place. He should still be punished for that, at least."

"Oh Elise—still bloodthirsty after all these years." Elder SharpTooth looked tired. "Can't you be satisfied with the fact that these three have promised never to show their faces around your tribe again?"

"No." Elder Elise's sharp gray eyes flashed pale green with anger. "He deserves to be punished—that is the law and I am not prepared to ignore it just because the two of you are softhearted old fools."

"Now wait just a minute, I came here as a favor to both of you. The Grizzlies don't care about the affairs of the Wolves and the Lynxes but I came anyway. And I don't care to be insulted." Elder RoughCoat drew himself up angrily.

"Elder RoughCoat is right—we're guests of your tribe and you're acting shamefully." Elder SharpTooth frowned, his bushy salt-and-pepper eyebrows drawing down.

"I'm sorry you feel insulted," Elder Elise said, sounding anything but sorry. "But the fact is the ruling of the Council has to be unanimous. And I do *not* agree with you that the Wolf should escape with no punishment. He broke our most sacred taboo. He should take the consequences of his actions."

"I'll take the brand." Jake stepped forward, shrugging off Maddy's hand when she tried to stop him. "If it'll make everybody here feel better and get this over and done with, that is."

"Jake, no," Will said in a low, urgent tone. "Don't let them intimidate you into doing this."

"I'm not intimidated—I'm impatient," Jake growled. "I want us to get the hell outta here and take Maddy with us. As long as we're here, on Lynx tribal grounds, who's to say what might happen? Look around, Will, your fellow cats aren't too pleased about the three of us getting off scot-free."

Maddy looked around with apprehension and realized he was right. There were ugly looks being directed at them from the stands and angry muttering coming from the crowd that had assembled to watch. Feeling cold all over again, she shivered and wrapped the thin silk robe closer to her body. What if the elders left and an angry Lynx mob decided to take things into their own hands? Jake and Will would fight to the death to protect her, she was sure, but there was no way they could take on every single adult male Lynx. Not to mention that a few of the cattier females, like Tamara, might join in as well.

Will seemed to come to the same conclusion Jake had because he nodded reluctantly. "All right—take the brand. But if you take it, then I'm taking it too."

Jake shook his head. "No—you don't have to do that."

"Yes I do. We're in this together now—all the way." Will stepped up beside him. "I'll take the brand too."

"If you two do it—" Maddy began but Will and Jake were already both shaking their heads.

"No, darlin'," Jake said gently. "The male bears the harshest punishment in the shifter world."

"But—" Maddy started to protest.

"Let Jake and I do this for you, sweetheart," Will cut her off. "It will appease the crowd to see us get punished and then we can all get out of here."

"Listen to them, Maddy." Vivien took her arm gently, drawing her back from her two males. "Let them do what they have to do. You can tend to them later, after it's over."

"But-but I don't want to see them hurt." Maddy felt sick when she thought of the pain both Jake and Will were about to endure.

"Sometimes love hurts, my dear." Vivien put an arm around her and squeezed gently. "Especially in the shifter world. You should know that by now. The fact that Will and Jake are willing to undergo this pain proves their devotion to you and your newly formed relationship. Don't undermine this beautiful gesture by refusing their gift."

*She's right. It's not nice and it's sure as hell not normal – not by human standards anyway – but it's true. I have to let them do this.* Maddy nodded slowly. "All right," she whispered even though her throat was so tight she had no idea how she squeezed the words out. "All right. I just hope...it doesn't take long."

"It won't," Vivien promised and to Maddy's surprise, she was right.

"Jake Redthorn and William Tanner—you are both sentenced to be branded with hot iron and silver," Elder SharpTooth said, lifting his voice so that it carried to the angry crowd. "And after that you shall be free to go and begin your own tribe with Madeline Grant, as long as you both do solemnly swear never to have contact with your native tribes again."

"I swear," Jake and Will said in unison.

Elder SharpTooth frowned at Elder Elise. "There—are you satisfied, Elise?"

She nodded, a small cruel smile playing around her mouth. "Yes indeed. The Lynxes will be willing to consider this matter closed as soon as the sentence is carried out."

Elder SharpTooth nodded. "Then let it be done."

A red hot branding iron was brought out by the same guard who had almost branded her earlier. First Jake and then Will was marked, the cherry red metal pressed hard to their faces—Jake's right cheek and Will's left.

Maddy felt she had to watch though hot tears were clouding her vision. Neither of her new mates flinched a bit when the hot iron kissed their faces but she flinched for them, squeezing Vivien's hand way too hard and trying not to sob out loud.

The sizzle of burning flesh seemed loud in the sudden stillness that had fallen over the crowd. The branding iron left an angry red, raised mark with a silvery sheen to it and it was obvious to Maddy that both Will and Jake would carry those marks forever.

*For me – they're doing this for me!* she thought. *Oh God, Jake...Will...what did I ever do to deserve this kind of love?*

She had no answer and then, mercifully, it was finally over.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Does it hurt much?" Maddy put out a tentative hand to Jake's face but drew back without touching him.

"No, darlin'. It's not the pain of the brand so much as the sting of the silver mixed in with the iron on the branding iron they used to do it. It's mostly healed already but the mark won't fade because of the silver."

"I'm so sorry. I wish there was something I could do to make you feel better."

"Just being with you makes me feel better." Jake grabbed her hand and placed a warm kiss in her open palm. "And we have the rest of our lives to be together."

"Yes, we do." Maddy felt a warm glow of contentment at the thought. She squeezed Jake's hand and took another sip of hot tea. They were sitting together in his breakfast nook on the strangest Christmas morning she could ever remember having. There were no presents under Jake's tiny miniature tree and no smell of turkey roasting in the oven as there had been when she was a child at some of her better foster homes. And yet, Maddy couldn't ever remember being so happy before. Who needed presents and a Christmas feast when she had the two men she needed and loved most in the world nearby?

"You're awful quiet, darlin'. You tired?" Jake asked, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Not as much as I thought I would be," Maddy said. "After our all-day road trip yesterday."

After the mating ceremony and the trial they'd spent most of Christmas Eve driving back to Jake's cabin in Will's SUV since the Lynx tribe had refused to fly them back in their private jet. It had been a long trip that lasted well into the night, all three of them taking turns with the driving, and they had barely had the strength to take a shower and fall into bed when they finally got home.

But all in all, Maddy was feeling remarkably rested today, even though they'd only slept in until ten in the morning. She thought it probably had something to do with the fact that she'd woken up warm and content between her two mates. Just being near both of them made her feel fulfilled and ready for action. What kind of action she was embarrassed to admit to herself, but she was hoping to fulfill her promise to the elders about mating with both of them very soon. It wasn't so much that she needed to—she wasn't experiencing the fierce aching cramps as she had when she was in heat. It was more that she *wanted* to—wanted to touch both of them intimately, wanted to seal their pact to be together always. She was too shy to actually say as much to either one of them but maybe a little later on she could drop a few hints...

"Well, that's the last of it." Will came in the kitchen door, stamping his feet to get the snow off his boots and breaking Maddy's train of thought. "Thanks for letting me store my stuff in your shed until I get a place of my own, Jake."

Jake frowned. "What do you mean, a place of your own? We're all together now—you're living here with me and Maddy."

Will ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "Yeah, about that... Look, I know you two don't want a third wheel hanging around. I only said what I said to get you out of there without Maddy getting branded. So as soon as I find a place—"

"Your place is *here*." Jake stood abruptly and Maddy followed him, feeling hollow inside. She and Jake had already discussed when they could move her out of the crappy apartment she was currently renting and into his cabin. And there had been no question in her mind that Will would do the same. He might have to reestablish his practice and find some new clients but he was a good lawyer and she was sure that wouldn't be a problem. The thought of him going someplace else and not being there with her and Jake made her feel empty and incomplete.

"Jake's right," she said, putting a hand on Will's arm. "We want you with us, Will. More than that—we *need* you."

"No, you don't." Will frowned. "I appreciate the gesture but we all know you and Jake would be happier by yourselves. Besides, this cabin would be pretty cramped with three people living in it."

"I'll build on an addition," Jake said without hesitation. "I know you need your privacy to work. I'll make you an office right off the living room if you want."

"It's not about me having privacy to work. It's about the *two of you* having privacy to be together." Will blew out a breath in obvious frustration. "Look, if you're worried about the integrity of our new tribe, don't be. I'll come around often enough to keep us intact. But I won't hang around here where I'm not needed, messing up your relationship."

"You wouldn't be messing up our relationship—you're *part* of our relationship," Maddy protested. "Will, please, don't you understand? I need *both* of you."

"And I feel the same way," Jake said.

"Sure you do." Will clapped a hand on Jake's shoulder. "Don't think I don't appreciate the gesture but you can give it up—I'm just not buying it. Now, I think I'm going to take a drive—maybe clear my head a little. You two go have some fun while I'm gone." He winked but Maddy thought she could see the hurt under his joking exterior. The need to belong. And yet he was still going.

She began to feel panicky. No matter what they said or did Will wasn't going to believe they really wanted him—really needed him. And if he left there would be a gaping hole in their new bond and she and Jake would never really feel complete again. She was sure of it. "Will, please," she pleaded, then turned to Jake. "Do something—you've known him longer than me."

Will was already halfway out the door but Jake grabbed him by his arm and hauled him back.

"Hey, what the—" Will began, frowning. "Let me go."

"Not 'til you listen—really listen—to what I have to say." Jake looked at him seriously. "Will, we've been friends for a long time and that's all we've been. But things are different now—we're mates. And that means you don't get to just walk out on Maddy and me with no warning."

"You think I don't want to stay?" Will's sarcastic outer mask began to crack and Maddy could see the anguish in his deep green eyes. "Of course I do. But she chose you in the mating circle, Jake. You—not me. Because you two *belong* together."

"Not without you. You thick-headed sonuvabitch, what's it gonna take to convince you? Maddy went to me because she bonded with me first, that was all. That doesn't mean she doesn't need you too."

"Jake's right." Maddy went up on her tiptoes and laid a soft kiss on Will's lips. "I *need* you."

"And damn it, I need you too," Jake growled.

"The hell you do, Jake. Why don't you let me go and you and Maddy do what comes naturally? You never consummated your mating, you know."

"Our mating, you mean," Jake growled.

Will frowned. "What?"

"I said *our* mating—as in the three of us. Nobody's consummating anything unless we're all together and that includes you, Will."

"Come on, man—that's crazy. You don't really want to—"

Before Will could finish, Jake pulled the other male into a tight embrace and kissed him on the lips. Not a light kiss, as Maddy's had been—this was a hard, no-holds-barred kiss that made it obvious Jake wasn't kidding around.

At first Will fought the kiss but Jake was clearly determined not to let up. His arms tightened around the other shifter's body and he pressed forward. Only when Will finally stopped fighting and accepted the other man's mouth on his did Jake draw back and look him in the eye.

"What the hell?" Will said a little shakily. "We've been friends a long time, buddy, but you never put the moves on me before."

"Never had to before," Jake said gruffly, stepping back. "It was the only way I could think of to make you realize Maddy and I are serious—we want you with us, Will. We need you. Not just Maddy—me too. I need you. As a friend and as a mate. Can you see that now?"

Will sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I believe you believe what you're saying at least, if that helps any. I just...I don't know if it would work. I mean, you and I were raised around shared matings, Jake, and I don't know about you but in my tribe they weren't always the smoothest relationships. I love you and Maddy both—I just don't want to ruin that by pushing it too far or in the wrong direction."

"But it's not the wrong direction—it's the exact *right* direction. Don't you see?" Maddy asked. Standing there, watching the strangely erotic kiss between Jake and Will, she'd come to a sudden realization. There was a bond between them now—the three of them. But it was a new bond—shaky and tenuous. They needed a way to cement it—to set it in stone so it would never break. But how?

"I know you think it's the right direction, sweetheart," Will said gently, giving her a look filled with longing and regret. "But this could ruin us—all three of us. And anyway, I never really intended—"

"To stay with us? To love us and let us love you?" Maddy walked forward and insinuated herself between the two hard masculine bodies. "Why don't you try it before you turn it down, Will? Just once—the three of us all together."

"Maddy's right," Jake growled. "We should stop all this beating around the goddamn bush and just go to bed. That's the only way this is going to get settled."

"Jake, be realistic." Will frowned. "Look, you were with Maddy first and while I appreciate your offer to share, you have to admit your past proves that's not exactly your forte."

Jake grew very still and for a moment Maddy was afraid. Was Will bringing Jake's bloody past, the girl he'd loved and lost because he refused to share her with another male, crossing the line?

But then Jake shook his head and sighed. "Is that what's holding you back, Will? Because I swear to you, I'm not that guy anymore. I was young and stupid back then—not thinking about anybody but myself. Now I'm thinking of the three of us. In fact..." He took a deep breath and looked Will in the eyes. "To show you I'm serious, I think we should do a tasting ceremony."

"A what?" Maddy asked uncertainly.

"A tasting ceremony. It's a shifter ritual two males perform when they agree to share a female," Will answered, frowning. "Are you sure about this, Jake?"

Jake nodded. "Very sure. It just *feels* right. And then you'll know Maddy and I both want you—you'll know it in your bones, the way we do." He nodded at Maddy who was still looking at both Will and Jake uncertainly.

"Is it like the marking ceremony?" She was tingling all over. Just the memory of the first time Will had touched her so intimately while Jake had held her made her feel hot and needy. Back then she hadn't known she loved Will, hadn't known that she needed him as much as she needed Jake. But now, knowing what she did, having the same kind of experience would be so much more intense.

"It's like that but a little more involved," Will said. "What happens is, Jake will breed you and come in you, filling you with his seed and then I'll taste you."

"And then Will does the same thing—fills you with his cum—and I taste you," Jake finished for him. "It symbolizes that we're willing to share everything and that having the other male's seed in you, marking you, doesn't bother us." He smiled. "Well—what do you think, darlin'? Does it sound okay?"

"Mmm...well, it's not exactly what I expected, but it sounds like fun." Maddy smiled at him. "So why do you get to be first?"

"Because you bonded with me first. In a way, this is me telling Will I don't mind sharing you with him—that I accept him and want him as a mate as much as I want you," Jake explained.

"And you really feel that way? You really want to go through with this?" Will asked.

"Absolutely." Jake put an arm around Will and Maddy both, pulling all three of them close. "Come on. Let's go in the bedroom so I can prove it."



## Chapter Eighteen

Before she knew what was happening, Maddy was back in the master bedroom and half undressed. Only half because, while Will and Jake had made short work of their own clothes, they were taking their time undressing her.

"Jake," she admonished him, half laughing as he pulled up her sweater inch by inch, kissing her abdomen as he went. "At this rate we'll never get started. You're unwrapping me like I'm some kind of present."

"You are, darlin'." Jake kissed her again. "The best Christmas present I ever got."

"Mmm, absolutely." Will tugged off her jeans and began toying with her panties. Maddy was glad that Vivien had given her a bunch of clothes before she left. The sexy black underwear especially, which had been intended as a mating gift, was coming in handy.

Her aunt had been in tears to lose Maddy so soon after finding her but she'd promised to call later. "They might not let me see you because of the Ghosting but no one can keep me from calling," she'd said, sniffing a little. "But don't worry, dear, I won't call until you and Jake and Will have some time to, you know, *get settled*." Maddy took this as a euphemism to mean whenever she and her two men had gotten enough of each other sexually. Of course, the way she felt right now Aunt Vivien might just have to put off her phone call for a while because Maddy couldn't imagine getting enough of what was happening both above and below her waist for a good long time. She just hoped Will felt the same when they were done with the ceremony Jake had suggested.

"Gorgeous," Jake murmured as he finally pulled her sweater all the way off, revealing the black lacy bra that went with her panties. "God, can't wait to get you completely naked, darlin'."

"You could have fooled me," Maddy laughed breathlessly as he pulled down first one cup and then the other, kissing her nipples tenderly as he went. "You seem to be taking your time about it."

"That's because this is too good to rush. Our first time all together." Will pulled down the top of her lacy panties and kissed the top of her mound. "This is something we'll always remember. Always cherish. No matter what happens afterward."

"Quit talking like a girl and trade places with me," Jake said, grinning. He looked at Maddy. "Can't wait to fill your sweet little pussy with my cum, darlin'."

"And I can't wait to taste you afterward," Will said.

Maddy felt a shiver of anticipation. "Now, boys – we've got plenty of time. No need to rush."

"No need at all." Jake gave her a smoldering look, his eyes flashing gold with obvious lust before turning to Will. "You wanna get in position?"

"My pleasure." Will came around to the head of the bed and sat behind Maddy with his back to the headboard. "Come on, sweetheart, let me support you."

Maddy scooted up until she was leaning against his hard chest, half reclining between his spread thighs. She could feel the hot, hard lump of his cock against the small of her back as she spread her own legs, inviting Jake in.

"That's right, sweetheart," Will murmured in her ear as Jake lifted her hips and fit the head of his cock to the slick entrance of her cunt. "Just open yourself up and let Jake fuck you. Let him fill you up so I can taste how delicious you are filled with his cum."

Maddy moaned breathlessly as Jake entered her, his thick shaft sliding to the hilt inside her pussy. "Why...why do you need to have him come in me to taste it?" she asked, barely able to get the words out as the pleasure began to build inside her. "Couldn't...couldn't you just taste it right from the source?"

Jake held still inside her for a moment. "Are you suggesting that Will should suck my cock, darlin'? Because I don't think he'd go for that."

Will laughed. "No, that kiss you gave me is about as far as I can go."

"Mmm, I don't know. That was a pretty hot kiss." Maddy undulated her hips, loving the power she felt as both men groaned at her provocative movements.

"I've had worse," Will admitted as Jake began to move inside her again. "But I'd still rather kiss you, sweetheart."

"I would too." Jake suited action to words, leaning down to capture her mouth in a long, hot kiss as he continued to pump inside her.

Maddy moaned and kissed him back, bucking her hips up to meet the deep thrusts of his cock. She could feel the pleasure building inside her but she wasn't quite there yet, which was all right since they could take as much time as they wanted touching and loving each other.

Sure enough, it wasn't long after Jake broke the kiss that he started thrusting harder and faster. "Spread your legs wide, darlin'," he instructed in a low growl. "Need to come in your pussy and let Will taste me on you."

Maddy tried to do as he said and Will helped her, supporting her thighs and kissing the side of her face. "God you're beautiful when you're being fucked, sweetheart," he murmured. "Just like the first time I saw you, riding Jake's cock and loving every minute of it."

Maddy moaned both their names as Jake thrust as deeply as he could inside her and she felt a hot rush as he filled her with his cum.

"So good. God, darlin'—so hot and tight and wet," he groaned in her ear. "Love you so much."

"I love you too," Maddy told him breathlessly as he came to a stop inside her. She knew they would be in this position for a while—the thickness of Jake's knot inside her

reminded her of that. But with Will supporting her from the back, she wasn't in the least uncomfortable. It seemed perfectly right to relax back against one of her mates and feel the other one filling her. Perfectly right and perfectly wonderful. But at last Jake pulled out of her and moved to change positions with Will.

"Maddy," Will said formally, as soon as Jake was at her back, supporting her. "I take from you the seed of my mate and I take pleasure in the taste of his seed mixed with your honey." Maddy shivered with desire as she watched Will bend his head to lap at her freshly fucked cunt. He took his time tasting her, dragging his tongue in long, slow licks that teased her swollen clit but never quite brought her to the edge. God, when were they going to let her come? The ceremony seemed to be one long tease that was making her hotter and hotter without bringing her to completion.

But before she could protest, Will was pulling her up to her hands and knees and putting her in position. Maddy spread her thighs and leaned against Jake's broad chest. She felt more vulnerable this way, with her breasts hanging down like ripe fruit and her open pussy on display. But Jake soothed her as he supported her, stroking her sides and breasts and twisting her nipples gently until sparks of heat and light seemed to run through her entire body.

"Please...God, Will, I'm so ready," she moaned at last.

"Me too, sweetheart." Will stroked her back and then gripped her hips, preparing to enter her. Maddy moaned as his thick shaft glided inside her, filling her to the hilt, and then Jake kissed her, thrusting his tongue in her mouth as Will penetrated her with his cock.

It seemed to take longer with Will, or maybe it was just the sexual tension spiraling upward inside her that made the time seem to stretch like taffy. But whatever the reason, Maddy knew she would never forget the delicious feeling of kissing Jake while Will drove into her, filling her completely. She had never felt so open, so sexy and free. But at the same time there was something missing and she wasn't quite able to come, even after Will withdrew and Jake took his turn tasting her.

"God, Jake I'm so close," she moaned, threading her fingers through his wild black hair. "So close but I can't quite get there."

"That's because we didn't really finish the ceremony," Will murmured in her ear. He seemed to take great pleasure in watching Jake kiss and lick between her thighs as he held her.

"Wh-what do you mean?" Maddy gasped. But suddenly, she knew. The tasting ceremony was all about sharing. But the two men hadn't really shared her—not yet—not completely. "You need to be in me, don't you?" she murmured, turning to look at Will who was holding her from behind. "Both of you. At the same time."

"We won't ask you to do that until you're ready, darlin'," Jake said, looking up from between her thighs. "That's a big step to take and it's not a decision Will or I can make for you."

"Look at us. How much more ready can we be?" Maddy gestured at the three of them sprawled out on the bed. They were all naked and the warm, musky scent of sex hung heavy in the air. She had just finished opening herself to both Jake and Will, could feel the cum of both men filling her pussy and she still felt empty—incomplete. She knew without being told what she needed to change that. Knew that she needed both her mates filling her at once.

"Maddy, do you really mean that? You're not just saying it to make me want to stay?" Will frowned at her uncertainly.

"I'm saying it because it's true. I want both of you. *Need* both of you." Maddy sat up and drew Jake closer so she could put her arms around them both. "Let's finish the ceremony. Really finish it." Her heart was drumming in her chest and her cheeks were hot but despite her embarrassment, she knew her words were true. She wanted what she was asking for—wanted to have both Jake and Will inside her, filling her at once. It was the only way to make Will see. The only way to keep him with her and Jake where he belonged.

Jake raised her chin with one finger and searched her eyes with his own. "You sure about this, darlin'? Because once Will and I are both in you, there's no going back. Shifter biology means we'll all three be together for a good long time."

"I know what I'm getting into." Maddy nibbled her lower lip. "But I want you both—all three of us together. And I trust you not to hurt me. Although if there *is* a little pain involved, well, you two endured worse for me." She laid one hand gently on Jake's branded cheek and the other on Will's.

"We took the brands because we love you, sweetheart," Will said gently. "You don't owe us anything for that."

"I know I don't owe you—it's not about that." Maddy smiled at him. "It's more like I want to *show* you how I feel. How I want you and need you both. I want to bring us all together and this seems like the best way."

"I'll try it," Will agreed after a pause. "But...I can't promise it will change my mind."

"You don't have to promise anything," Maddy told him. "Just give Jake and me a chance to convince you."

Jake reached around Maddy to put a hand on Will's shoulder. "Maddy's right. Just give us a chance."

Will nodded. "All right. Now?"

"The sooner the better," Maddy murmured. Sitting between the two of them, feeling the heat from their big bodies, was making her ache with need. The feeling wasn't exactly like the painful cramps she'd had while she was in heat but it was just as intense somehow. It was her body telling her this was right, Maddy realized. That this was what she needed—what they all needed.

"I'd have to agree with you, darlin'." Jake leaned down to steal a kiss. "But we need to get you ready first."

"Ready?" Maddy looked at him uncertainly until Will cupped her bottom.

"I think Jake means ready down here, sweetheart," he murmured. "Have you ever had a man inside you here?"

"Um...no." Maddy bit her lower lip, suddenly realizing that this was for real. She was really going to take one of her mates – neither of whom was small – deep in her ass as well as her pussy.

"Don't worry. I've got something that will help." Jake gave her a quick kiss and got off the bed. He left the bedroom for a moment and when he returned he had a small bottle of lube in one hand. "Got this at our last stop on the way home," he said, getting on the bed again. "I was hoping we'd get to use it sometime soon."

Maddy gave him a smile that only trembled a little. "Good thing you were thinking ahead."

"Always, darlin'." He kissed her again. "Now why don't you lie back and let me get you ready? I wasn't quite done tasting your sweet pussy and I can do this at the same time."

Will grinned. "Multitasking at its best. Come on, Maddy. Lean back against me and let Jake do the honors."

Soon Maddy found herself in Will's lap again, this time with a pillow under her ass so that Jake could reach her a little better. She leaned back against her Lynx mate's muscular chest and watched in fearful fascination as Jake knelt between her legs.

"Good girl," Jake murmured, before leaning down to kiss the top of her slit. "Just spread your legs and let me work on you." Then she felt his hot tongue inside her, pressing deep to tongue-fuck her pussy. At the same time he spread something cool and slippery around her virgin rosebud that made her gasp.

"God!" Maddy felt as if she were on fire from the waist down. Was she really going to lie here and watch as Jake licked her and opened her? But already desire was overcoming her embarrassment and her thighs were spreading of their own volition as Jake pressed forward, filling her with his tongue above and his fingers below.

"Does it feel good?" Will asked softly in her ear. "You like the feeling of Jake getting you ready for us, sweetheart?"

"God, yes." She moaned as first one, then two of Jake's thick fingers slipped inside her tightly guarded lower entrance. "I-I've never felt anything like it."

"That's what makes it so hot." Will kissed her cheek. "God I love to watch your face while Jake eats you."

"You-you do?" Maddy asked as Jake pumped his fingers inside her, scissoring gently to open her up.

Will nodded. "Sure do, sweetheart. And I love to watch the way you pull his hair and buck up to meet his tongue. It's the hottest damn thing I've ever seen."

"It is?" Maddy gasped the last word because Jake had chosen that moment to take a long, leisurely taste of her open pussy, running his tongue from the top of her slit to the entrance of her channel while his fingers pushed even deeper into her below.

"Uh-huh." Will kissed her mouth as gently as Jake was kissing her cunt. "Your nipples get all hard too," he murmured. "And you make these hot little sounds—moans and cries—especially when Jake is sucking your sweet little clit."

As though on cue, Jake chose that moment to take her hot, swollen little button between his lips and lave her with his tongue. Maddy cried out, unable to help herself, as a wave of pure pleasure washed through her.

"See? Just like that," Will said and began stroking her nipples. "You look so hot, all wet and open with Jake between your legs, Maddy," he continued, his deep voice slightly hoarse with desire. "God, watching him lick you out is almost as good as doing it myself. But right now I'd rather fuck you."

"Me too." Jake looked up from between her legs. "Do you feel ready now, darlin'?"

"Mmm, yes." Maddy smiled at both of them. "More than ready."

"Good." Jake slid up between her thighs and kissed her on the mouth, sharing her own salty sweet flavor with her. "Then I think it's time."

"More than time," Will murmured. "Come on, sweetheart. I think it's best if we all lie on our sides for this."

Maddy crawled eagerly to the middle of the bed and before she knew it she was lying on her right side with Jake facing her and Will at her back. For a moment she wondered about their placement and then she realized that, at least for their first time together, it would be easier to have Jake's knot in her pussy instead of her ass when they were all locked together. She had a moment to wonder if Will's barb would still engage if he wasn't in her sex and then Jake was lifting her top leg and both men were positioning themselves at her entrances.

"Will, you first," Jake directed and Maddy felt the broad head of the Lynx male's shaft pressing hard against her rosebud. She cried out and would have tightened up if Jake hadn't stroked her face and whispered that it was all right and that she should close her eyes and concentrate on being open, on letting herself be filled with Will's cock.

Maddy moaned and tried to do as he said. Soon she could feel the thick shaft push past the ring of muscle that guarded her rosebud as Will filled her slowly. She had never had a man there before—never even dreamed of it back in the bad old days when she didn't like sex. But now it felt as natural as breathing, and so right that she was almost surprised when she felt Will's trim hips press against her ass and knew he was all the way inside her.

"God, you're tight. You okay, Maddy?" he whispered in her ear, holding still inside her so that she could get used to having him there.

"Yes." She nodded, and found it was true. It was strangely erotic to have Will buried inside her where no one else had ever been. But she was still incomplete. She

needed something else, something more. And she knew what that was. "Now," she told Jake and moaned softly as she felt the plum-shaped head of his cock breach her channel and press slowly but deeply into her pussy. At last he was in her to the hilt and she felt a wave of pleasure wash over her as her long-delayed orgasm crashed over her at last.

"God," she heard Jake groan as she spasmed around them both. "So good, so right, darlin'."

"I...I know," she managed to gasp as the orgasm began to recede. "Almost perfect."

"Why only 'almost'?" Will asked in her ear.

"Because, I need *more*." Maddy had never been this filled before. It was the first time but she was sure it wouldn't be the last. When this was over she wanted Will to know he belonged, wanted to know that the three of them would stay together forever. And the only way to make that happen was to fuck. "I'm ready, boys," she said in a warm, husky voice she barely recognized as her own. "Make me yours."

It was all she had to say. With a low groan, Will slid slowly out until he was barely inside her. Then, just as he was thrusting in again, Jake did the same. Maddy gasped at the delicious feeling of the two thick shafts rubbing together inside her and then she was lost, cast adrift in a sea of emotion as the two of them established a regular rhythm of filling and fucking her until she thought she would die of pleasure.

Maddy never knew how long it lasted, the push and pull of the two thick cocks inside her. Both men came multiple times, filling her once again with their cum both in front and in back and as they did another, stronger wave of pleasure began to grow inside her. She began to understand that when this orgasm hit her it would be something like she'd never experienced before. Something so huge, so powerful, it would be all encompassing. Something that would include them all. She was going to come and take both her men with her into a whole new realm of existence—a place where all three of them belonged together forever.

Just as the realization hit her, the orgasm did too. "Oh God, Jake...Will," she moaned, writhing between them. "Coming now, coming so hard. Need...need both of you to come with me."

There were low murmurs of assent and then she felt both thick shafts press inside her, as hard and as deeply as they could. And then both Will and Jake were coming as she came—all three of them reaching the peak at the same time.

Maddy cried out as an energy she'd never felt before rolled through her, fusing the bond between them, cementing it, setting it in stone just as she had wished for. And somehow she understood that it was because of her—she was the catalyst that made this possible. It was as though she was a window and light was pouring through her, bathing all three of them in its warm, perfect glow. And the light they all felt was love—their love for her and for each other. It was pure and perfect and healing and Maddy knew that despite her inexperience with being taken this way she wouldn't be sore in the least when this was over.

The two muscular male bodies bracketing her own were perfectly still for a moment and then the pure and shining pleasure began to ebb, pulling back slowly like a wave being drawn back into the ocean. It seemed to take a long, long time for it to end but finally Maddy heard someone moaning softly and realized it was her.

Jake realized it too because he looked at her with concern. "You all right, darlin'? That was...intense."

"Intense doesn't begin to cover it." Will stroked her hair. "I've never felt anything like that ever. I felt so completely...connected. To both of you. It was weird—but in a good way."

"A very good way," Jake murmured. "You think so, Maddy?" he asked her.

"It was perfect." She smiled at him and reached out to cup his cheek only to realize that something was wrong—something was missing. "Jake—your brand. What happened to it?"

"My what?" He reached up to feel his right cheek and frowned when all his fingertips encountered was smooth skin. "What the hell? Where is it?"

"What happened?" Will raised himself on one elbow so he could touch Jake's cheek too. "It's gone."

"Yours too," Jake told him, looking up.

"Really?" Maddy twisted, trying to get a good look, and Will bent down obligingly so that she could stroke his smooth right cheek, which was healed like Jake's. "God," she murmured. "You can't even tell where it was. It's just...gone." She looked back at Jake in confusion. "What is it—some kind of Christmas miracle?"

He laughed shortly but there was wonder in his pale blue eyes. "Maybe so. I've heard of mates being so strongly bonded they could heal each other but I never thought I'd see anything like it—much less experience it."

"I always thought those stories were just old legends," Will said. "And none of them says anything about a three-way bond. A—"

"A bond like ours," Maddy finished for him. "You have to admit, Will, if we're strong enough together to get rid of those awful branding scars, there's no doubt we belong together."

"She's right, buddy." Jake reached over to squeeze Will's shoulder. "We're good for each other—the three of us. This is where we need to be."

"Forever," Maddy added.

Will sighed and then shook his head. "All right—I can't fight it any more. You two are right—we belong together. Happy now?"

"More than happy." Maddy drew him back down so that the three of them could snuggle together in Jake's big bed. "Complete."

It was true. For the first time in her life she knew exactly where she belonged. It wasn't in the human world—although she knew she would go back to work tomorrow—and it wasn't with the cruel and sarcastic members of the Lynx tribe. No, it



was right here in a little cabin in the woods surrounded by the love and protection of her two mates in their little tribe of three. Despite all the pain and uncertainty she'd gone through in the past week, she knew she would be forever grateful that Jake had found her and that Will had found them both. And she was never leaving either of them again.

As she drifted off to sleep, happy and content, she could hear Jake and Will discussing plans to add on to the cabin and she knew she had found her true home at last.

*The End*

## About the Author

Evangeline Anderson is a registered MRI tech who would rather be writing. And she is nerdy enough to have a bumper sticker that says “I’d rather be writing.” Honk if you see her! She is thirty-something and lives in Florida with a husband, a son and two cats. She had been writing erotic fiction for her own gratification for a number of years before it occurred to her to try to get paid for it. To her delight, she found that it was actually possible to get money for having a dirty mind and she has been writing paranormal and sci-fi erotica steadily ever since.

Evangeline welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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