



Tiger's Heart

By

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Dedication

Wendy, once again, thank you for everything. Amanda, Anne, Michelle, and Myra, thank you for taking me into your group and under your wings.

Chapter One

Jan stood shaking on the front porch, staring at the house before her, and feeling like a fool. She had no business bringing her problems to Caitlyn's doorstep. Guilt assailed her at her selfishness—and her weakness.

She took a step back, but before she could pivot, the door opened, spilling light across the porch. Caitlyn's husband, Damien, appeared wearing the trademark snarl he gave everyone, but his wife.

While she'd never disputed he was the sexiest man alive, she'd been more than vocal in protesting his marriage to her former roommate. The CIA could take lessons from the man on secretiveness.

And no one should get married after only knowing someone a month.

Of course, knowing a man eight months before getting engaged hadn't done her any good.

Anger melted from Damien's features to be replaced with shock and then concern. "Jan?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come." She shuffled backwards so quickly, she tripped over a groove between two planks and would have landed hard on her ass if Damien hadn't caught her. Unfortunately, his large hand closed around an even larger bruise. She swallowed a scream, but it came out a strangled squawk.

He dropped her arm, alarm in his eyes. "Jan—"

She held her hands up as if she could block his concern. "Never mind. Don't tell Caitlyn I was here."

"I can't let you leave," he told her gently. "You know I can't. That's why you're here. Come in and tell me who did this. We'll protect you."

Something told her the "we" wasn't he and Caitlyn. She shook her head, ignoring the pain and vertigo it caused. "I shouldn't have come. Don't tell Caitlyn."

God, she hated hearing the plea in her voice.

"Damien, what are you—oh my God! Jan?" Caitlyn emerged behind her husband, their two-month-old daughter, Patrice, in her arms.

Breathtakingly beautiful, Caitlyn would make a supermodel feel homely—and Jan was no supermodel. Worse, Caitlyn had a big heart and a soul as beautiful as her face.

All but shoving Patrice into her husband's arms, Caitlyn enveloped Jan in a gentle hug. "Who did this to you? Is he in jail? If not, I'll kill him. Come inside this minute. Don't you worry about a thing."

In moments, Jan found herself ensconced on a soft, gray couch, wrapped in an old quilt, and warming beside a crackling fire. Caitlyn banished Damien to the kitchen for something hot and "Irish" for Jan to drink. Once he'd left with Patrice tucked into the bend of one arm, Caitlyn sank gracefully to her knees, a fluid move Jan imagined had made the former stripper a great deal of money. Caitlyn took Jan's icy hands into her warm ones. Tears brimming, she asked, "Who did this to you?"

Jan caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror on the far wall. A gray bandage splayed across her forehead and down a nose swollen to three times its normal size. Lovely cotton rolls

stuffed into her nostrils were a stark color contrast to her two black eyes. Other bruises blossomed on her cheeks and chin.

Shame curled in her stomach. "I fell—"

"Don't. Don't lie to me." Caitlyn's voice cut her off sharply.

"I'm not—"

Two gentle fingers traced the mottled bruise on Jan's throat. The bruise she'd forgotten. The one that held the distinctive shape of a man's hand.

Jan pulled her neck away from Caitlyn's probing touch.

"Talk to me," her old friend pleaded on a whisper.

She gave a negligent shrug. "Met a guy, seemed great, things went south."

Caitlyn's eyes searched her face. "I'm so sorry. Is he in jail?"

"No. I pressed charges, got a restraining order. He made bail and ... a piece of paper won't stop a fist."

"They didn't re-arrest him?"

"The hospital called the cops, but he was long gone by the time they went looking for him."

"Well, you'll just stay here until they put that bastard away."

Jan let out a bitter laugh. The hospital had called in a social worker. A no-nonsense woman who'd explained the system to her. "He doesn't have a record. In fact, he's Mr. All-American. It's my word against his, and even if he were convicted, he'd never spend a night in jail."

"You don't know that."

"First offense."

Caitlyn's eyes searched her face, but she didn't argue. "You'll stay here. We'll protect you."

Jan shook her head. "I can't do that. I don't know what I was thinking. I can't dump my problems on your shoulders. Especially with a baby in the house."

Her eyes swept the windows along one wall. Beyond them lay miles of forest, a perfect vista for someone to sneak up and attack the small family. The thought of the baby being hurt, or worse, because of her had Jan's stomach churning with dangerous signs of upheaval.

"If I thought for a minute your being here would put my daughter in danger, I'd never have let you in the door. I'm asking you to trust me."

Jan closed her eyes and wanted to drift away on the cloud of nothingness behind them. Her mind tried to pull her under, away from the exhaustion and pain. She forced her lids apart. "I'll stay the night."

"You'll stay until it's safe." Damien strode into the room sans child.

"Patrice—?" Jan began.

"—is asleep in her crib," he informed her, extending a steaming mug with melting marshmallows.

She accepted the offering automatically, even murmured her thanks, but eyed the "Irish" hot chocolate with suspicion.

"Drink it," Damien ordered, and she had a moment to wonder if he ever didn't give orders. His expression softened. "It's not spiked."

"Damien, she needs something," Caitlyn protested.

"Lucas is on his way over. He's bringing his bag."

"Lucas?" Jan asked.

"He's the local vet."

Damien gave his wife an exasperated look. "Lucas went to vet school before he went to med school. He's a doctor."

"I've already seen a doctor." Her hand touched the bandage on her face of its own accord.

"And you're going to see another one."

"Why?"

"Because you are resisting the help you sought from us. I want to make certain you aren't taking unnecessary chances with your health. And I can smell your pain. Lucas can give you something for it."

He could smell her pain? She almost laughed. Who knew Damien could be so melodramatic? "I'm fine. I don't need anything."

"Humor me." Damien's words brooked no argument.

Normally, she would have argued just for the satisfaction of tweaking him. People tended to jump when Damien said jump. She'd always taken a perverse pleasure in the frustration she caused him by refusing to do so. For the moment, she lacked the energy to annoy him. Not that it would have done any good. There was something ... immovable about his demeanor. Something harder than she'd ever seen.

For the first time, she understood Caitlyn's inexplicable trust in the man.

Chapter Two

Stifling a yawn, Lucas jogged up the stairs to the Alpha's house. Following his shift at the hospital, he'd been called to help a friend's mare with a complicated delivery. After spending the last few hours with his arm shoved up a horse's vagina, the last thing he'd wanted to do was take care of some stray human.

He let himself into the house and called an obligatory greeting.

"We're in the back parlor," Damien called back.

The exchange was for the humans. He'd known where his Alpha was, and Damien had heard him long before he'd reached the front door.

He walked into the room, and nodded his greeting.

Caitlyn rose and took a step back, revealing a smaller figure huddled on the couch. Other than the bruises and swelling, there was nothing remarkable about the woman on the couch. She had shoulder length brown hair and murky-brown eyes. He knew that when the swelling faded, her features would be plain. She was short, neither fat nor thin.

Still, something about her arrested his attention, drew him to her. He sat the black bag on the coffee table and plopped down on the magazine beside it, ignoring the irritated look Caitlyn shot him.

"I've already seen a doctor," the human announced. "I'm sorry we disturbed you."

"I can see that." He studied the bandage on her face. If they'd packed her nostrils, it was a bad break. "Where are your post-treatment instructions?"

"In the car."

"I'll get them," Damien volunteered and strode from the room.

Lucas studied her in silence for a few minutes. His temper boiled and his tiger stalked closer to the surface. It echoed and magnified his fury. He'd seen a lot of abuse in the ER over the years, but unlike most of his colleagues, he'd never managed to become immune to its horror.

He wondered if that were because of his tiger or his vet training. He'd noticed vets didn't tend to become callused to animal abuse the way doctors did to human abuse.

His beast took a few moments to settle. They both wanted to demand the bastard's name and eliminate him from her life—in a permanent and preferably bloody manner.

She shifted under the weight of his stare. "I'm afraid there's nothing for you to do here. I can write down my address for you to send me a bill for your time."

"You haven't filled the scripts they gave you?" He knew she hadn't because he couldn't smell them. Even if she hadn't taken them, he would have been able to scent them through the child-proof lids.

"No, she hasn't." Damien held a few sheaves of paper, a sample of antibacterial ointment, and two small squares that had been torn off a prescription pad.

"It was too late to go to the pharmacy," the woman defended. "Besides, I don't like the way the pain pills make me feel."

"The pharmacy at the hospital is open twenty-four/seven." Lucas pointed out, taking the papers from Damien. "And even if you refused the pain meds, you need the antibiotics."

"I wasn't at the local hospital. I was down in Carey," she defended.

"You drove over two hundred miles and never passed an exit with an all-night pharmacy?" Carey was three hours south, and a much larger town. Something clicked. "You had time to arrange for a rental car, but couldn't go to the pharmacy at Carey Memorial?"

She flinched, not that he blamed her. No one liked having their prevarications called. "The rental company delivered to the hospital. How did you know I rented a car?"

The black, swollen tissue around her eyes made it impossible to read the exhaustion he knew lurked behind them. That exhaustion clearly dulled her faculties. "I saw the car on my way in."

She tried to sniff and choked instead. If it hadn't exacerbated her pain, it would have been amusing.

"It could be my car."

"Not with the rental sticker and eight-hundred number on it."

She blinked at him. "Apparently, my intelligence quotient is plummeting."

"Pain will do that," he assured her.

"Can you give her something?" The Tigrine asked, moving behind him.

"I've never seen anyone actually do that?" the wounded woman mused.

"Do what?" Caitlyn asked, alarmed.

"Wring their hands. That just looks strange."

"I'm not wringing my hands," Caitlyn announced, twisting her hands against each other.

"Are too."

"I can't give her the antibiotics. I don't carry them with me." His voice cut off Caitlyn's response, which he feared would have been "am not." He glanced at the name on the hospital paperwork, before fixing her with a stern expression he normally reserved for recalcitrant mules. "Jan, I can give you something for the pain tonight, but the antibiotics are more important."

"I'll send someone to get them filled," Damien said from the chair behind Lucas.

The tone of voice and Damien's behavior toward the human told Lucas that the Alpha was taking her under the protection of the pride.

"I'll take care of it tomorrow," Jan protested.

He felt her alarm and tasted guilt on the air. She didn't want to burden anyone. She was the type that needed to be in control. He didn't bother to tell her that was impossible with Damien.

Damien snorted and an argument erupted. Lucas ignored the two of them in favor of reading through the hospital report. Fortunately, the human, Jan, was filing her own insurance—or was uninsured—because the hospital had provided the detailed-yet-concise information forms insurance companies required. The justification of expense gave him enough information to understand her injuries and surmise the treatment provided.

She also had copies of various forms and reports from social services and the police. He pieced the timeline together and realized she'd been beaten over twelve hours earlier.

He opened his bag and extracted an ampoule—one of the few he carried weak enough to be safe for humans—and a syringe.

"I most certainly—what do you think you are doing with that?"

He winced. She'd hit a pitch he'd have sworn could only be reached by nails raking down a chalkboard. "I'm going to give you something for the pain."

"No, you're not." Eyes as big as dinner plates fixed on the needle he held.

He ignored her protest. "Are you allergic to any medications?"

"Yes."

"Which ones?"

"All of them."

"Jan—"

"No needles."

"I know five-year olds who don't act this childish at getting a shot."

"Then go torture one of them."

"It's only a little sting for a second," he cajoled.

"No."

"You'd rather suffer the pain of a broken nose, cracked ribs, and multiple contusions than feel a quick needle prick?"

"Absolutely."

"Caitlyn, do you know if she's allergic to any meds?"

Jan began to sputter with outrage and he hid a smile. Whoever hurt her hadn't damaged her spirit.

"I don't know." The Tigrine worried her lower lip. "Can't you just give her a pill?"

"I don't have any." Pills didn't work nearly as well on Tigre. "Damien, I need to see those prescriptions." A glance at the one for a narcotic had him smiling. "Same drug family." She shrank back into the corner of the couch. "You can't treat me without my consent."

"I don't need your consent. I have Damien's."

"What—?" she strangled.

"You can take this in the arm or the butt."

"No."

Caitlyn sat on the edge of the sofa. "Jan, you are being ridiculous."

"I know that."

"So stop."

"I don't want to."

"I swear to god, you are the most stubborn, irrational person I know."

They argued like sisters and Lucas could feel the tug of the string that switched on the light in the cartoon bubble above his head. If Caitlyn considered her family, then Damien could consider her part of the Pride by extension.

Caitlyn apparently decided to take matters into her own hands and began trying to unbutton her friend's shirt. Jan slapped ineffectually at them.

"Enough." Damien didn't raise his voice, but let his power leak into the word.

Lucas felt the pull of the command. It agitated his tiger, which began to prowl through the metaphysical realm that tied it to his soul. Caitlyn and the human felt the force of Damien's power. Though without a tiger, they'd feel it in a different way.

"Stop fighting us. Take your medicine and get some rest."

Jan subsided, but continued to glare at Damien. Lucas admired her spunk, and waited patiently for Caitlyn to help her out of her shirt, revealing a cute pink lace bra splattered with dried blood and a torso wrapped to protect her ribs.

He opened an alcohol pad before drawing the necessary CC's and flicked the side of the syringe. Depressing the plunger sent a thin squirt of liquid into the air.

Shifting forward to wipe her arm, he heard the magazine cover tear and reached for her arm. When his skin touched hers, his tiger roared in his head.

Mine.

Chapter Three

Jan opened her eyes and quickly discovered something more painful than taking a beating ... waking up the next morning. She turned her head and squinted at the alarm clock. Make that the next afternoon. She bit her lip and focused on the slight sting rather than her body aches as she rolled off the bed onto wobbly legs.

Afternoon light filtered softly into the room, suggesting it faced south. Thick carpets alongside the bed and before the door protected her bare feet from the cold hardwood floors. Her bladder shrieked its discontent and she shuffled towards the small doors opposite the bed.

A voice filtered through the main door and Jan paused at Caitlyn's words.

"I was just going to check on her, but I think you're wrong. I think you can tell her the truth about who you are."

Who who was? She shamelessly stopped to eavesdrop. Not hearing a response, she realized Caitlyn had to be on the phone.

After a pause, Caitlyn continued. "Jan is trustworthy. She'll protect our secret." Another pause. "Damn it, Damien. She won't go running to the media. Your people will be safe."

Secret? Media? His people? Her heart rate increased. What was going on?

"She's smart. She'll see how our compound runs and notice everyone kowtows to you. There's no correlation for your position in the outside world. It's going to make her suspicious."

The outside world?

"And Jan's unwillingness to see you as her dominant is going to be hard on you and thus hard on everyone else."

Her dominant? Oh, hell no. Had Caitlyn joined a cult? Did Damien have other spirit wives running loose? Images of Amish wives wearing black vinyl prairie dresses danced behind her eyes.

It made a lot of sense. Caitlyn had moved to the small township when she'd married Damien. On the few occasions Jan had visited, the locals had given her a wide berth. The whole town possessed a reputation for being secretive and unfriendly. She'd feared for Caitlyn moving into the insular community.

Not that she'd expected Caitlyn to be surrounded by banjo music. In fact, from what Jan could tell, the entire township—compound, she realized—was inhabited by well educated citizens—members—many of whom worked high paying jobs in the city where she and Caitlyn had been roommates.

How had she missed the fact that her friend had been brainwashed into a cult? Damien had an odd, masculine charisma, but there was no way under the sun he was going to add her to his list of wives. But she wasn't leaving without evidence—or Caitlyn and Patrice.

Even through the door, she could hear Caitlyn's sigh. "Okay. I love you, too."

Shit. With her shuffling walk, she couldn't move away quickly enough to avoid being caught eavesdropping. She grabbed the knob, pulling it open at the same time Caitlyn pushed, and plastered a bleary look of surprise on her face.

Caitlyn's green eyes widened. She held the doorknob in one hand and a cell phone in the other. "I was just coming to check on you."

"Bathroom?" Jan pleaded looking out into the hallway with some not-feigned desperation.

"There's one attached to your room." Caitlyn gestured towards one of the interior doors with her phone.

"Thanks." Jan shuffled to the bathroom as quickly as her protesting body could manage, hoping her friend had bought the act.

It wasn't until she used the toilet that she realized she wore a man's button down shirt and panties that weren't hers. It gave her the distraction she needed to divert Caitlyn's attention. Opening the door, she began speaking immediately, "I appreciate Damien loaning me a shirt, but surely I could have kept my own underpants."

Caitlyn smiled without suspicion. "Those are brand new. I bought a six pack of plain undies a few weeks ago for that time of the month."

"Tell me you didn't burn my clothes." Caitlyn had always chided her lack of style and Jan wouldn't put it past the gorgeous woman to take advantage of the situation to "improve" her wardrobe.

"Your clothes are outside, hanging on the line to dry. And the shirt belongs to Lucas."

Before, Jan would have attributed the solar drying technique to Caitlyn's innate hippie tendencies. Now, the cult women image reappeared in her mind. This time, they were hanging laundry in traditional Amish dresses, but with studded leather collars. And—wait ... what? "Lucas?"

Caitlyn studied a piece of art on the wall. A painting of a tiger habitat. "He offered it when we carried you upstairs. Before Damien or I thought of it."

"Did he think of the panties, too?"

Her old friend laughed, understanding the unasked question. "I put you in the shirt and panties. You helped. No one else saw you wearing neon orange panties with that pastel pink bra."

Jan rolled her eyes. "Don't start."

"I most certainly will, but not right now. We need to get some food in you so you can take the antibiotic."

"The antibiotic ...?"

"Damien had it filled, but you need to take it with food." Caitlyn crossed the room to give her a loose-armed hug. "Why don't we go downstairs and have a bite to eat?"

Jan hesitated. "Are my clothes dry yet?"

"No, but it's just you and me. And that shirt hangs low enough to be decent."

"Where's Patrice?"

"Rachel's watching her."

"Rachel?"

"Damien's cousin. She can't have children, so she dotes on Patrice."

Cousin or sister-wife? "I thought you said it was just you and me."

"It is." Caitlyn grinned. "Rachel took Patrice for a walk in her stroller. She's teaching the baby about the world."

"Isn't the baby a little young to learn?"

"Patrice falls asleep by the end of the driveway. Rachel knows it, but she's still having a ball." Caitlyn put a gentle arm around Jan's shoulders and steered her toward the door. "Come on. Let's get some food into you."

Jan let Caitlyn herd her to the door, but her mind was on the pills Damien had procured for her. Didn't cults use drugs to control—or kill—their members? Images of the cartoon Kool-Aid pitcher danced in her mind. Heeeeeey! Koolaid!

Not that she feared they were trying to kill her, but her anthropology background brought the concept of indoctrination screaming to the forefront of her thoughts. How on earth was she going to avoid taking those pills?

Chapter Four

Lucas circled the house. The anxiety that had kept him company as he'd paced the floor during the night had fled when he saw her sitting next to the Tigrine on the porch. Though worry still weighted his shoulders, his heart lightened at the sight of the small, battered woman.

She wore his gray-striped shirt—the collar peaked out under the heavy robe—and he was fiercely glad he'd stopped to change before answering the Alpha's call. It had provided him a small measure of comfort to know she'd slept wrapped in his scent. He'd wanted to bring her to his home—their home—but both Damien and Caitlyn had vetoed that. Not that Pride structure allowed for an override vote.

Caitlyn had been most fierce in her refusal, stressing his mate's humanity. He knew humans didn't have the gift of recognizing their mate. Hell, he'd lived as a human in med and vet school, far away from the comforts of the Pride.

Still, not taking his mate home had been the hardest thing he'd ever done. Caitlyn had stressed the importance of courting in his mate's culture. Leave it to humans to make everything complicated.

He wanted to vault the rail, but opted to not startle Jan. She smelled of fear, and the desire to soothe her scorched his heart. Taking the steps was a small enough concession.

"Good afternoon," he called.

Despite his cheerful tone, Jan jumped. Her coffee mug went flying and hot liquid splattered across the wooden planks.

"Jan? Are you okay?" Caitlyn grabbed some napkins from the tray on the table between them.

Lucas sped forward, landing on his knees before her. "Are you burned?"

"I'm fine. Just clumsy." The smile she offered was watery at best.

Overprotective instincts kicked into high gear, even as he intellectually recognized he was being ridiculous. He couldn't stand the idea of her suffering another instant of pain. "Did you burn yourself?"

"No, but I made a mess." She took the napkins and knelt to mop up the spill.

He stopped her by placing a gentle hand on hers. It worked better than he anticipated. Electricity arced between them, and he knew she felt it when she jerked away so fast she nearly toppled over backwards.

Catlike reflexes allowed him to catch her, and he savored the feel of her against his palms. "Easy, love."

"Let go," she breathed.

She panted softly in pain and he pulled her to her feet and deposited her back into the rocker with care. She gripped the arms of the chair and stared at him, eyes glassy with shock. He took two careful steps back, letting her see his intention to give her space.

Kneeling to mop the spill, he asked, "How are you feeling this morning?"

"She's sore," Caitlyn offered, when Jan remained silent.

"That's to be expected. Has she taken her meds today?"

"She's only been up an hour and has just finished eating. They say 'take on a full stomach'."

"I'm fine. I don't need any drugs."

"I won't allow you to suffer needlessly." He couldn't keep the order from his voice. The Tigre need to protect a mate roared through him.

She stuck her well-packed nose into the air. "I'm not suffering. I'm just sore. Not that it's any of your business."

Caitlyn cut in before his tiger could react to her rejection. "Lucas undertook your care last night. That makes him your doctor. You are being insulting and ungrateful."

To his surprise, Jan looked a little sheepish. "I apologize. I appreciate your assistance, but I'm not taking the drugs."

Realizing he was coming on too strong, he forced down the tiger's protest that she not suffer. "You have to take the antibiotic, at least."

Jan huffed an exasperated breath, and Caitlyn passed her one of the two pill bottles and a small glass of juice. Lucas deposited the wet napkins on the tray, watching her out of the corner of his eye.

She squinted at the time released capsule, turning it slowly in her hand. Then, she tugged gently at each end of it.

"You swallow it whole," he told her.

She gave him a withering glance. "I'm aware of that."

He raised a brow and leaned back against the rail. To his amazement, she palmed the antibiotic and pretended to swallow it. Even without Tigre senses, he'd have been able to see her do it. She gave a fake stretch as she drank the juice.

He waited for her to finish and set the glass down before leaning over to pluck the pill out of the potted plant next to her chair. Not bothering to knock the dirt off, he held it out to her. "Try again."

Caitlyn shot to her feet and stood with hands on hips. "Oh my God. What are you thinking? This is taking stubbornness to a whole new level—even for you. For crying out loud, Janine Masters!"

Jan took the pill and wiped it clean. Her expression went beyond resigned. She looked ... cornered. His tiger began pacing, and it took all he had not to carry her off and lock her away someplace where nothing could hurt her. Where nothing could put that expression on her face.

Caitlyn poured another glass of juice and slammed it down beside her friend hard enough for the liquid to slosh over the sides. The Tigrine crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her eyes, apparently unmoved by the trapped body language Jan displayed.

"Don't call me Janine," his mate muttered before swallowing the drug.

Her weak defiance calmed his tiger, though only slightly. It pleased him to see her spirit.

"Are you both happy now?" Bitterness tinged her words, and the scent of fear grew heavier.

"We are." Caitlyn ignored the bitterness. "Let's go inside and warm up. For the life of me, I can't figure out why you insisted on eating out here."

He'd been wondering why the women were outdoors. It was chilly, even in the early afternoon sun, and neither of them had Tigre metabolisms to keep them warm.

Lucas offered Jan his hand, and gritted his teeth at the hesitance in her acceptance of his help. Her hand felt icy against his. She took two steps and one of the wool socks she wore snagged on a splinter. She stumbled into him, crying out when he caught her around the torso.

He gentled his touch and dropped his arm around her waist, letting her lean against him without putting pressure on her ribs.

He was going to park her someplace warm and if he had to, he'd sit on her.

Chapter Five

Lucas watched Caitlyn rinse the plates and load the dishwasher. His mate had fallen asleep within minutes of settling on the oversized couch in the family room. He'd tucked two blankets around her and sat down in a chair to watch her sleep, when the Tigrine had ordered him to escort her to the kitchen.

She shut the dishwasher and turned to rest a hip against the counter. "You can't treat her like Tigre, Lucas. I know it goes against your instincts, but if you hover over her constantly, you're going to come across as a stalker and scare the shit out of her."

"She's injured. She could need me." His concerns were overblown, but logic held no sway over his beast.

"She's fine. She's safe and in your Alpha's care."

He heard the warning in Caitlyn's voice and ran a hand through his hair. "My tiger can't see past the need to protect her. To know she's hurting, that someone's after her ... it's killing me."

"I love her, too. I promise we won't let anything happen to her."

"Have you heard from Damien?" He didn't try to hide the plea in his voice.

Damien had gone to consult an elder, a matriarch. A mystical Tigre who lived in solitude on the far side of the state. To their knowledge, no Tigre had ever claimed a human as a mate before. They'd taken human women to wife throughout time, but never as a mate. It was uncharted territory, and no one knew the ramifications.

In fact, Caitlyn was the first known child ever born of a human and shifter. Lucas sent a silent prayer of thanks to the gods for that. Had Damien's mate been pure Tigre, he doubted his Alpha would have believed him when he claimed the human woman was his mate.

"He'll see the matriarch tomorrow." Sympathy lit the Tigrine's eyes. "There's no guarantee she'll be able to tell us anything."

Lucas glared back towards the room where Jan slept. "I don't want to leave her. I'm not sure I can leave her right now."

She crossed the room to hug him. "I know it's unlikely that Jan'll suffer the mating fever, but we don't know what's going to happen. If the matriarch can't tell us for certain, are you willing to risk sending her into the mating heat? You and I both know that sex is the only thing that will douse the fever, and she's in no condition for that."

He hugged her back. "You know I wouldn't do that."

Caitlyn stepped back, but kept a hand on his shoulder, offering the comfort of touch that all Tigre needed. "You'll go to that conference you're scheduled to attend, and then meet with other Tigre doctors like you planned. It will give her a chance to heal. Selene can remove the packing."

It made sense. Perfect, logical sense. If Jan reacted like a Tigre female, once the nasal packing came out, his scent, specifically his pheromones, would propel her into a mating fever that only his sexual claiming of her could cure. Still, his entire being rebelled at leaving his mate unclaimed and without his protection. It didn't help that he doubted a human female's ability to experience fever or mating.

He took a shuddering breath. "Fine, but I want her equipped with LoJack."

* * * *

Two days later, a kind nurse came to the house to remove the packing. A singularly painful and humiliating procedure that Jan prayed she would never have to endure again.

Not only did she have to deal with the embarrassment of having a stranger pull things out of her nose, she had to deal with the bizarre wish that it had been Doctor Hunky rather than the NICU nurse who'd done it. After all, what self-respecting woman didn't dream of having a handsome man yank things from her nostrils?

Some therapist would be able to buy a boat after treating her.

Worse. She was becoming paranoid. For the life of her, Jan couldn't shake the fear that Caitlyn had joined a cult. Not that there was any evidence. The town seemed full of men, but had only a small number of women, and even fewer children. While not an expert on cults, she did remember that cult leaders sought to impregnate multiple women. Moreover, there was no hint of isolationism. Yes, the townsfolk kept to themselves, but they didn't eschew the outside world.

That therapist would be able to buy a vacation home rather than a measly boat.

After all, Damien had left the morning after her arrival. If he'd been running a cult, wouldn't he have stuck around to woo her with his magnetic charm?

The thought had her snorting a laugh. The odds of Damien having a magnetic charm equated to the likelihood of Disney producing a live action film about a dog that didn't make her cry.

Caitlyn set a steaming mug of chocolate before her with a smile. "What's the grin for? Thinking about a certain handsome, blue-eyed doctor?"

Her friend had done nothing but talk up Dr. Hunky. Caitlyn the Matchmaker. Jan just smiled and took a sip of the drink. She held no illusions about her chances with the gorgeous man. Jesus. The man should have been a movie star or supermodel. At the very least, he should have been a personal trainer. And no one that pretty should be that smart. It just wasn't fair.

"You know he's too handsome—"

"I will not listen to this again. Stop putting yourself down." Fury darkened the beauty's eyes.

The fierce loyalty Caitlyn showed warmed her more than the hot chocolate. She knew she was beautiful in her friend's eyes, and that Caitlyn would never understand how a man would see someone who needed to lose thirty-five pounds. If only men could see her through Caitlyn's eyes.

She opted to change the subject rather than try to explain women and weight to her beautiful friend with the perfect metabolism. "I called in sick again today, but I should head home. I have to go in tomorrow."

"I hated it when you moved so far away."

Jan shrugged. "It's where the job was."

"Don't you miss working in the field? Is the money worth giving that up?" The sincere compassion and love in Caitlyn's eyes took the sting from her query.

No, it's not. She'd loved working as an archaeologist. A true archaeologist, not Indiana Jones. To this day, she didn't understand how anyone could watch Raider's and be more interested in the tiny statue than the temple. Did they not see the awesome, rolling ball booby trap? Wasn't that far more cool than a stinking idol and a bag of sand?

She forced her mind back to the question. "It was time to grow up. You can't build a life on a dollar more than minimum wage."

Guilt creased her friend's forehead. "I'm sorry. I hadn't considered how my leaving affected you financially."

She rolled her eyes. "I'd have kicked your ass if you had."

"I know." Caitlyn smiled. "Even though you disapproved of my decision, you supported me."

"It wasn't completely altruistic. Once I saw that maid of honor dress, I knew you would owe me for the rest of your life."

"The dress was beautiful." Caitlyn glared at her.

"Two words, my friend. Puffy. Sleeves."

"They weren't that bad."

"Ha!"

"You looked gorgeous."

"No one looks gorgeous in mint green with puffy sleeves and big ass mint green bow on their ass."

"The color made your eyes pop."

"That was the side effect of trying not to cry at people seeing me in that monstrosity."

Whatever Caitlyn was going to say was interrupted by Jan's cell phone.

"What was that about being a grownup?" Caitlyn asked as the phone happily burbled the theme song to the Muppet Show.

That was the only happy part of the call.

Chapter Six

The phone on his hip vibrated. Lucas rose from his seat and stepped out to answer it. It didn't matter as he hadn't been paying any attention to the lecture anyway. Fucking drug reps. He'd never treat an animal like these companies wanted him to treat people.

Seated on the back row it took mere seconds for him to slide into the lobby. A glance at the phone's screen showed Damien's name. Panic assailed him as he flipped the phone open, demanding, "Is she alright?"

"She's fine," Damien assured him.

"Did she return home? You have guards on her, don't you?"

"She didn't go back to her apartment. She's staying with us for a little while."

"She agreed to that?"

"Not yet, but she will. She really has no other option."

Fear settled in his stomach like a lead weight. "What happened?"

"Jan's fine," Damien repeated. "But, she got a call this morning from the police. It appears her apartment was vandalized and her bed set on fire. Some pretty nasty graffiti was spray painted on the wall."

Fury and fear warred within him, twisting around his stomach and heart. "I'm coming home."

"That's not a good idea, my friend."

"If our positions were reversed and it was Caitlyn?"

Silence greeted his question, and Lucas felt a burst of satisfaction. His Alpha understood.

After a moment, Damien spoke. "Come home, but we need to find a way to keep your pheromones away from her. There's a good chance they'll cause her to go into heat."

That surprised him. Based on his knowledge of Tigre and human anatomy, he'd expected the matriarch to say there was no chance of the mating heat. He glanced around to be sure no one could hear him. "The matriarch believes a ... believes Jan could go into heat?"

"Yes. She's convinced of it."

Lucas frowned. "Medically, the chances are slim. At best, just this side of nil."

"Let's discuss it when you get home."

"I'm leaving now."

"There'll be a ticket waiting for you at the airport."

Damien hung up, and Lucas flipped the phone shut. His long legs ate up the distance to the nearest cab. He was grateful that his Alpha had offered even that small amount of information, given he was speaking on a cell phone.

The travel gods conspired against him and he met delay after delay before finally arriving home sometime after midnight. He went directly to Damien's house.

Caitlyn met him on the porch in a cute pair of flannel jammies with feet. He wanted to laugh at the ultra-sexy ex-stripper in the yellow duck pajamas. He did grin.

"One smart word—"

"I can't believe Damien hasn't found those ... whatever they are ... and burned them."

"They are very comfortable to lounge in." She sniffed. "I assure you I don't sleep in them."

"My faith in our fearless leader is restored."

Caitlyn laughed and hugged him. "It's safe to come inside. Jan retired a few hours ago."

He followed the Tigress to the small parlor where he'd first seen his mate. Had that only been a few days earlier? The Alpha extended a snifter filled with a golden liquid, and Lucas accepted the brandy with gratitude.

All the way home, his mind had raced with questions—interspersed with invectives directed at the FAA and airlines. Now, he couldn't figure which question to ask first. His needs to protect his mate, claim his mate, and seek retribution for his mate battled within him and rendered him mute.

"Have a seat," Caitlyn entreated as she settled on the sofa.

Lucas sank into the chair opposite her and took a restorative swig.

Damien poured himself a glass and sat next to his mate, wrapping his free arm around her. "I'd apologize for dragging you away from the conference, but I know better."

"What happened?"

"The police got a call from Jan's neighbor. Someone—" Caitlyn snarled, but her mate continued "—trashed the place and painted 'Die Whore' on the wall."

"Jan's pretty badly shaken."

Lucas growled and didn't need a mirror to know his eyes had shifted. "I'll kill him."

"You'll get your beast under control first." Damien's power touched him and with effort Lucas leashed his tiger.

"It's odd," Caitlyn mused. "He's beaten her twice, but she took that almost in stride. When she heard about the apartment she fell apart."

Lucas's brief rotation in psychiatry meant he could explain the mental defenses of the human brain, such as disassociation, but his mind locked on one fact. "The bastard beat her twice."

"He hit her once and she took immediate legal action—filed a police report, pressed charges, got a restraining order—very unusual for a human. The second time she came here." Damien delivered the news with careful precision.

The idea of a man—human or not—inflicting injury on a woman had him rocketing out of his seat. He paced in effort to control the tiger.

"She never loved him."

Caitlyn's quiet statement arrested him mid-step. After a moment, he remembered to put his foot down. "How do you know that?"

The Tigress gave him a watery smile. "Because I know Jan—and I know a little about abuse."

Belatedly, he recalled Caitlyn's degree in social work. Still, he snapped out, "Explain." Damien's growl had him adding, "Please."

Caitlyn's eyes shone with sympathy. "Human women outnumber human men and the idea of women being protected or even valued is becoming thought as outdated. I know women who find the idea insulting."

Lucas's heart sank. He wanted nothing in his life like he wanted the honor of protecting Jan.

"Jan's not one of them, but she's practical. In fact, she prefers things she can logically plan out. That includes romance. I've no doubt she picked Elliot because she decided it was

time to get married, and he fit some checklist she devised. If she'd really been in love with him—or really imagined she loved him—she'd have found excuses for his behavior rather than going to the police.” An unholy gleam lit her eyes. “No doubt the son of a bitch is freaking out at her strength; likely never occurred to him that she wouldn't just roll over and take it.”

A glimmer of hope burned in his chest.

“She'll be more afraid of you than Elliot.”

Caitlyn's casual observation struck him like a brick to the gut. “I would never hurt her.”

“I know that. Jan doesn't. I assure you, bruises don't frighten her nearly as much as losing her heart will.”

Lucas's stomach turned over and he swallowed the fear. Love was a given between Tigre mates ... but there'd never been a true mating between a human and a Tigre before. The thought drew him from the bloodlust over Elliot. “What did the matriarch say?”

Damien leaned back against the sofa, draping his arm across the back behind Caitlyn. He propped one ankle on the opposing knee and swirled the brandy. He looked for all the world like a man enjoying a relaxing night cap. Lucas wasn't fooled for a minute.

“We've known for a while that shifters are dying out. We never speak of it, but we all know it's true. Even Tigre are faltering, and we are second only to the Wulfen in numbers.”

Lucas nodded. It was one of the reasons he'd become both a vet and a doctor. Understanding the entire nature of his people was necessary to understanding their decreasing numbers. While he lacked the pharmaceutically funded luxury of a lab and full-time research, it remained his dream and passion to solve the mystery of his people's decline. He'd been exploring the slight hormonal differences in human and Tigre females during their cycles and wondered if the spike he'd noticed in Tigre women preceding menstruation was significant.

The semi-amused expression on Damien's face drew Lucas back to the present. “Forgive me. I was lost in my thoughts.”

Damien nodded. “The matriarch believes nature is ... resetting the balance.”

“The balance?”

“Nature is adjusting to our decreasing numbers by expanding our gene pool. She's including select humans in our mating heat to increase our genetic base. The matriarch believes Jan is one of many who will find herself mated to a shifter. She's heard of this happening with two other breeds of shifter.”

Lucas stared at Damien for a stunned moment. “As a human the pheromones secreted by a Tigre—”

“You are thinking like a scientist.”

“I am a scientist.”

“You are also a metaphysical being and those metaphysics are what make a human—Jan—your mate and susceptible to your scent.”

Lucas opened his mouth to argue and silently closed it. He had no idea what argument he would have made. With a flash of insight he realized he had not been willing to consider an explanation that wasn't medical. An unexpected sense of shame and remorse filled him. He'd followed the path of many doctors and begun worshipping exclusively at the altar of science. If not for being Tigre, he'd have become an atheist.

Remorse coiled inside him and he sent a silent apology to the gods of his people.

Caitlyn leaned towards him with her gentle smile. “There's one way to know for sure. When will it be safe for you to be around Jan?”

“If the matriarch is right, never.” Lucas muttered, wrapped in his guilt.

"I meant when will it not be agony for her to have sex with you?"

The Tigrine's bluntness startled him out of his self-absorption and he considered the question. "Her rib was cracked, not broken Two weeks, but three would be safer."

"Split the difference. You're having a party in two and a half weeks. Until then, stay away from Jan," Caitlyn ordered.

"I'm having a party?" Was it all humans who made no sense or just the ones he knew?

The Tigrine rolled her eyes. "So we have an excuse to bring Jan over."

"I can't just invite her to dinner?"

"Nope. Then we wouldn't get to watch." Caitlyn grinned.

He shoved a hand through his hair. Two and a half weeks until he had a mate ... or not.

"And it's better we're there in case something goes wrong with the meeting." Damien added.

Well, that was reassuring.

Chapter Seven

Jan hated feeling like a charity case. And that's exactly what she was. No matter how she tried to spin it in her head. She was mooching off Caitlyn's family.

Damien had even driven her down to meet with the police. Hadn't that been more fun than a barrel of monkeys. Caitlyn had volunteered to go along, but that would've meant bringing Patrice because she was nursing. Jan may have sunk to mooching off her friends, but she'd be damned if she dragged a baby to the police station and a crime scene.

Her boss had been less than pleased when she'd called to explain. He hadn't been able to fire her thanks to FMLA, but she wasn't getting paid for the time off. She could read between the lines well enough to know she wouldn't have the job long once she got back. Her boss had been seriously put out, and she couldn't blame him.

How had she managed to screw up her life so badly and in such a short period of time?

She strolled through the woods behind Caitlyn's home and appreciated the beauty surrounding her. As much as she wanted to get lost in nature—figuratively, not literally—she couldn't. Her mind kept turning over the oddities of the little town and the people who made it their home.

If it weren't for a certain ... feeling, she'd almost believe she'd stumbled into Mayberry. Except when she went into the local diner. Everyone fell silent for a good three or four heartbeats and there was the constant feeling of being watched. It was like having a cat stare you awake. It wasn't a malevolent feeling, but she hated it just the same.

At times she thought she was losing her mind for believing she'd stumbled into a cult and other times she was convinced she should notify the ATF. Not that she saw guns or felt she was in imminent danger, but she didn't know who else to call. Was there a one-eight-hundred-I've-seen-a-cult number?

Worse, she had no one to call and discuss her fears. When she'd moved to be closer to Elliott, she'd left her friends. In hindsight, the manipulation and excuses he'd used to separate her from her friends and keep her from making new ones bordered on the cliché. She couldn't believe she'd been so gullible ... so stupid.

Jan sighed. She'd been so arrogant, assuming she'd never find herself in this situation. No one ever believed they would find themselves in an abusive relationship or confess to a murder they didn't commit or be tricked out of their life savings. Hell, Al Capone believed he was a philanthropist and couldn't understand why he was so reviled. But when it all came down to it, humans were predictable, susceptible creatures.

Apparently those undergraduate sociology courses were good for something.

She paused at the free flowing river and could almost feel the forest take a breath. For a brief moment, she considered letting herself slide into the water, just to see if someone would come charging to the rescue ... or at least to get a closer look while laughing their asses off at her.

If it hadn't been so damned cold, she'd have given into the urge. Instead, she kicked at a few pebbles and watched them plunk into the water with a sound like a tiny rainfall.

"Jan," Caitlyn called a moment before she appeared through a break in the trees. Exasperated affection colored her voice. "There you are. Are you ready? We're going to be late."

With anyone else, Jan would have smiled and swallowed her tongue. But this was Caitlyn, and despite time and distance, Jan felt closer to her than anyone else in the world. That renewed realization brought a wave of sadness she struggled to ignore.

"I think I'm going to beg off. Would you make my apologies to Doctor Hu- to Lucas? Tell him I have a headache."

"No."

"No?"

"No." Caitlyn sighed. "Jan, the man has gone to a lot of trouble having the three of us over for dinner. I know you prefer books to people, but I'm not letting you skip out of this dinner."

Guilt wiggled its way into her resolve. She owed her friend and her friend's annoying husband. The least she could do was attend a dinner and try not to spill anything on herself. Maybe it would be an early evening.

"Fine," Jan muttered, knowing she sounded less than gracious. Hell, she was going wasn't she? Feeling awkward, she turned back towards the house.

Caitlyn shook her head. "It will be quicker to go this way."

Jan followed Caitlyn along the river. "We aren't going back? What about Damien?"

"Our land abuts Lucas's. It's faster this way." Caitlyn assured her, tossing a smile over her shoulder. "And Damien's already there. Apparently Lucas got a new grill."

Jan shook her head. "What is it about men and grills?"

"I think cooking meat with flame calls to their inner caveman."

They rounded a curve and Jan took in the large, artistically rustic home. They approached from the back, giving them a view of a large deck, sprawling out from a bank of floor-to-ceiling windows that likely provided a beautiful view of the river and surrounding hills.

On the far corner of the deck stood a grill reminiscent of a large Star Wars droid—something the Empire would have engineered. The men tinkered with the R2D2 shaped propane tank off to the side.

Caitlyn led her unerringly to a staircase hidden in the curve of the house, calling out as they climbed the stairs, "So will we be able to eat or should I call for a pizza?"

"Just have to turn on the gas and we're ready to grill," Lucas assured her with a smile.

He turned that ten-ton, mega-watt smile on her and Jan felt her knees turn to water. She smiled back before she could think. Damn it. Was she simpering?

She was! She was simpering!

She wiped the smile from her face and glared at him on principle. With effort she ignored the surprised hurt in his eyes.

Lucas turned back to the grill and fiddled with the dials.

In the uncomfortable silence that followed, Damien announced, "The grill will take a few minutes to heat up. Can I pour anyone a glass of wine?"

Caitlyn eyed the Malbec with undisguised lust. "What year is that?"

Damien gave his wife an unguarded and affectionate look that softened his features.

"Not one Patrice would appreciate," he assured her kindly.

"I'll have water," Caitlyn sighed with theatrical exaggeration. "But pour everyone else a glass."

Jan tried not to be touched by the way Damien first ensured his wife had a tall glass of water before opening the wine.

Lucas joined Damien at the small table and took two glasses. He crossed over to extend one to her. Feeling guilty for early rudeness, she stepped closer to accept the bowl-shaped glass.

She took a deep breath, inhaling the chilly air and caught the richer scents of dark chocolate and spice that chased away the cold and slid down her throat with the thickness of syrup. She lifted her eyes to his and the glass slipped from her fingers, dousing her before shattering against the decking.

A primal sense of self-preservation had her taking a step back when her body screamed for her to move closer to that delicious smell. "I'm sorry ... I "

At a loss, she bent down to gather the shards. Lucas caught her arm, causing her to drop the few pieces of glass she'd grabbed. She had the most absurd urge to throw herself at him, bury her nose in his neck and snuffle him like a dog. Desperation forced her to breathe through her mouth. She prayed no one noticed the panting.

"Did you cut yourself?" The urgency in Lucas's voice almost pierced the fog surrounding her. Almost.

She watched as though from a distance as the delicious man spread her fingers, checking for abrasions and embedded glass.

"Oh, Jan," Caitlyn groaned. "Your shirt and jacket."

She looked down to see the purple stains spreading across her white shirt and the lapels of the unzipped, beige jacket. A part of her mind told her that she should respond to her friend, but she couldn't seem to latch onto that thought. She couldn't focus on anything but that amazing, intoxicating scent.

Lucas cupped her elbow and the heat from his hand penetrated the layers she wore and caused a prickling, almost static feeling to spread along her arm.

"... club soda. I'll get you a shirt," Lucas was saying, though it was hard to hear him over the roaring of her blood.

She was barely aware of him leading her into the house. What the hell was wrong with her?

Chapter Eight

A few minutes later, the stained clothing soaked in the sink in the utility room and Jan was dressed in one of Lucas's button down shirts, sipping a wine she could never afford.

Lucas was explaining the various architectural features of his home, which she'd managed to glean was new. However the sprawling house with its warm, rich woods held no attraction for her. Sight paled in comparison to the rich smells surrounding her and the succulent taste that lay on her tongue. A flavor that had nothing to do with the wine she couldn't taste.

The liquid trembled in the glass and she carefully sat it down[,] afraid of another spill. The other three kept shooting her furtive looks, which she pretended not to notice. No doubt they thought her a crazy klutz who'd burn the entire house down if given the chance.

Letting her eyelids close, she drifted in the dark for a moment, savoring the sensations that were trying to drown her. When she opened her eyes, Caitlyn was standing inches from her with alarm on her face.

"Jan? Are you okay?"

Heat burned her cheeks and she wondered how long she'd been standing there like a moron.

Damien appeared at his wife's side. The wicked grin on his face should have been warning of the danger facing her. "Rachel called. Patrice is really fussy. Caitlyn and I need to go check on her. I'm sure you won't mind staying for dinner so all of Lucas's effort doesn't go to waste."

Jan blinked stupidly at him, but her brain failed to engage before her friends slipped out the back door, leaving her staring at the beautiful man that had been haunting her dreams.

"Shouldn't you check on Patrice?"

"Why? She's not my daughter."

"She could be sick." Jan felt a weird sense of pride in her ability to reason an argument.

"She's fine. First time parents worry over everything."

"You wouldn't worry?"

"If she were my daughter? I'd be worse than them."

The sweet comment prompted a laugh. Unfortunately, she followed the laugh with a deep breath that had her bones melting and heat coursing through her blood. "Maybe I should go."

"I'd rather you stay."

God, she wanted to stay. More than she'd wanted anything else in her life. "I"

He took shameless advantage of her hesitation and moved to the refrigerator to pull out a Tupperware container. "How do you like your steak?"

"Medium." The response was automatic and not at all conducive to getting the hell out of Dodge.

He grinned at her in a boyishly charming manner. She glared at him in frustration.

Undaunted, he opted for a little social blackmail. "I've let these soak for two days in the secret family marinade."

The savory scent wafted through the air when he finally won the battle with the lid.

"It smells wonderful." Her tone conveyed polite disinterest and a trace of guilt.

"I'm glad you think so. It will taste even better. I appreciate your staying. I'd hate to have done all this and have it go to waste."

Fuck. She had to concede the battle. Basic manners held her hostage in the home of the sexiest man she'd ever met.

She followed him out onto the deck and watched him, keeping as much distance between them as possible. The cold air burned her tongue and dried her mouth, but not using her nose for inhalation cut down on her ability to smell and helped her retain some dignity. Not that the urge to hurl him to the ground and have her way with him was abating.

The tinkling sound of broken glass drew her attention, and she saw Lucas kneeling with a dust broom in hand cleaning the mess she'd made. A glance around revealed steaks sizzling on the grill and she realized a chunk of time was missing. The surge of fear-induced adrenaline somewhat cleared her mind. What was wrong with her? How long had she been standing against the railing staring at nothing? Had he been talking to her? No doubt he thought she was completely certifiable.

Pride had her stepping forward. "I should clean that."

"I've got it." He smiled up at her, twisting her stomach into knots. He rose and dumped the wineglass remains into the trashcan beside the grill. "Are you too cold? I should have offered you a jacket, but I thought the cold would be helpful."

She blinked at him, her mind still wrapped around his smile. Realizing she was fading again, Jan bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to draw blood. The pain cleared the fog. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"Would you be more comfortable waiting in the house where it's warm?"

"I'm fine," she lied.

He raked her with a professional eye, before turning back to the steaks.

She lost another chunk of time to the whirlpool that sucked her out of reality and into the dark, liquid pool of desire. Her heart pounded a tattoo and she battled against the need that surged within her. One moment she stood on the deck fighting the war, the next she realized the need was winning and a retreat was her only option. She opened her eyes and discovered she was sitting at a table, a half-eaten dinner on the plate before her.

Lucas sat at the opposite side of the table. Somewhere in the back of her mind the idea lurked that she could ask him for help. He was a doctor, but self-preservation necessitated getting away from him as fast as possible.

She shoved away from the table, ignoring the embarrassing amount of moisture the movement sent sliding down her legs. Thank God she wore dark, thick jeans that would hide her secret. The chair crashed to the ground with a loud thump, and Jan quickly discovered that the bones in her legs had turned to jelly. After a wobbling moment, the lone functioning brain cell she had ordered her palms to brace against the table.

"ThankyouverymuchfordinnerIshouldbegoingnow." She managed the burst of words on one exhalation.

Lucas rose and circled the table to her side. She watched in equal parts horror and anticipation as his hand rose to cup her face. The moment his skin met hers, she knew she was lost. The heat from his hand seared her skin and yet she could feel the coarse texture of his hand, the calluses from hard work. The deliberate gentleness, the carefulness, he used in touching her with those large hands.

She raised her eyes to his and even in her state of heightened arousal, she saw the concern blazing in them.

“I know you don’t understand what’s happening, but I promise—I swear—I’ll take care of you.”

Her heart melted at his words and her eyes brimmed with tears of relief when he lowered his mouth to hers.

Chapter Nine

He tasted like ambrosia, the nectar of the gods. It was a melodramatic comparison, but that didn't make it any less true. She hadn't tasted a bite of dinner or a sip of wine, but the touch of his tongue to hers had her taste buds flaring to life. The richest dark chocolate, the finest wine, held no comparison to the flavor of Lucas.

Her body went limp and she let him wind her arms around his neck. One press of his body against hers and she finally gave in to the yearning. Using all her strength, Jan held onto his neck as she pressed her chest against his. Rewarded with his groan of desire, she shamelessly lifted a leg, wrapping it around his waist.

Her nerves had sensitized to the point she could feel every whorl in his skin. No computer could hope to match his fingerprints as well as she could. Move over AFIS. She caught a semi-hysterical laugh before it escaped.

Concern flared in the depths of his eyes. "It's going to be okay. You can trust me."

The sincerity radiating from him warmed her heart—the only part of her that hadn't already gone global-thermonuclear war.

She had a brief moment of lucidity to savor the concern and deeper emotion he exuded, before the need pulled her under again. He touched his mouth to hers and the brief hold she'd had on reality slipped away.

His kiss, a bare press of his lips to hers, brought her a desperate sense of relief. She nearly wept with the hope the vicious thirst for him would actually be quenched. The rush of hope carried a surge of energy that allowed her to become the aggressor.

She slid her hands into his hair, enjoying the cool slide between her fingers before she clutched silky handfuls and used her grip to pull his mouth harder against hers. He obligingly opened his mouth and for the first time in her life, Jan willingly relinquished her need to control everything. She threw herself whole-heartedly into his kiss.

The first stroke of his tongue against hers brought her more pleasure than any other man had managed with his hands. A rich taste, more potent than his scent, flooded her mouth, bringing a moan of delight to her throat.

"Easy darlin', I'll take care of you," he mumbled around her lips. He laughed gently against her mouth as she continued to try and climb his body. "I've got a nice, big bed."

"You've got a bigger floor right here."

He groaned. "I'm not making love to my—to you for the first time on a hard floor."

Her mind wrapped around the promise of more than one bout with him. "Floor this time, bed next."

She thought he was capitulating when he shifted against her, but instead, he swung her up in his arms and headed down the hall. But for the novel experience of being carried, she would have screamed at the delay.

The annoying little voice of logic still clamored in the back of her head that something wasn't right. Fortunately, it was easily drowned out by the tidal wave of need.

She decided he had built his house with the longest hallway in history. The walk seemed interminable, and even the novelty of being carried like a svelte movie star couldn't distract her from the hormones rampaging through her system.

"Is your bedroom on the moon?" she groused, as he turned a corner.

"We're almost there," he promised.

"Look! More floor!" she snapped, half-kidding, half ready to rip her hair out.

"Fucking housekeeper."

"Hey!" she protested. The need to defend a woman who cleaned up after a single man cut through the haze.

She felt him fumbling beneath her back as he growled, "She closes the bedroom door to keep in the heat."

"Fucking housekeeper," Jan agreed.

She felt the door finally give and Lucas staggered into the bedroom, kicking the door closed behind them.

The sensation of flying and falling distracted her from the heat roaring in her veins—and the décor. She hit the bed with a yelp. Did the man sleep on rocks?

"Sorry," he ground out, pulling his shirt over his head.

For one humorous moment, the polo hung on his chin. He tugged and she heard a ripping sound. A button pinged against her forehead hard enough to bruise.

She rubbed the sting and eyed his pants. "Why are you still dressed?"

"Why are you?" he countered.

Oh. Right. She had to be naked too. The voice in the back of her head switched from protesting her wantonness to protesting removing her clothes in a fully lit room. Seriously, men had walked on the moon, couldn't they have developed a full body stocking that shaped a woman's figure into a perfect hourglass, yet was undetectable to sight and touch? Something a man could caress without knowing it was there? Something a woman could feel through?

He toed off his loafers and she threw caution to the wind. One benefit of being a bit overweight was the double-D chest she'd developed. She decided the girls would be a great distraction from the rest of her. She pulled the shirt over her head, and was rewarded with a ... purr?

"You're so beautiful, baby," Lucas managed with obvious effort.

She suppressed a grin. He had his zipper halfway down and froze to stare at her still-bra-clad breasts. "You like them?" she teased, cupping the underwire supported weights on her chest.

"Take the bra off," he demanded.

"Not until you take your pants off," she countered, enjoying the heavy-lidded look he gave her.

He jerked his pants off so hard she could see red marks where the seams had rasped against his skin. Her libido held her hostage for a moment as she took in the sculpted chest, six pack abs and powerful thighs. It took her brain a moment to process the chili pepper boxer shorts with the large jalapeño placed ... coupled with the navy socks, she nearly doubled over in laughter. "Shit," he swore. "My housekeeper does laundry. Caitlyn gave me these as a joke."

Jan giggled. She couldn't help herself. Not that it wasn't funny, but quite frankly, his package strained against the pepper, making it look tiny in comparison. "Why is Caitlyn giving you boxers?"

"To humiliate me at my birthday party."

"That's my girl." She snorted in the middle of her laugh, but was too amused to care. "Love the salsa colored boxers with the dark blue knee socks. Quite a bold fashion statement."

"Laugh it up," he growled playfully, as she convulsed in laughter at the sight of him hopping on one foot and trying to rip off the offending socks. "Hell, laugh until you cry, just get your clothes off."

Despite her mirth, she hadn't missed the way his eyes remained fixed on her chest, while he stripped. Good to know the girls had the power to send the man in a semicircle as he fought a losing battle with his socks. Amused, she toed off her shoes. A little devil had her sit on the bed and bend forward to remove her socks, forcing the girls up and together. She had to bite a groan at the sensation of sensitive nipples and skin rasping against the bra. They swelled, tips hardening even further, against the cotton cups, and for a moment, Jan wasn't sure the bra would be able to withstand the pressure.

Lucas growled again, and this time the sound wasn't playful. She hid a smile and straightened, holding her socks in one hand. "See. Socks are easy to remove."

He'd managed to remove one sock; she saw it on the floor, a moment before he tackled her. She hit the mattress again, but this time with the force of a large man squashing her against it.

She yelped. "You have a thing about comfortable mattresses?"

"Bad for the back," he muttered, rearing up on his forearms to glare down at her. "You're still dressed."

She noted the odd way light played in his eyes and decided the bedside lamp—assumedly left on by the aforementioned housekeeper—had caused the strange refraction. "I got my socks off."

"I got my pants off," he countered, eyes falling to her breasts.

She suddenly wished she owned some sexy lingerie. Still, the way he eyed her plain-white cotton clad chest made her feel desirable all on her own.

His hands caressed her shoulders and she sank into the sensation of the hot, broad palms caressing her skin. It took a moment to register that her shoulder straps slid down her arms beneath his gentle touch. They hung on her bent elbows, making her realize her hands had tangled in his hair.

Instead of pulling away from her, he slid those hands behind her back. She arched slightly to give him better access and in a trice he'd unclasped the offending bra. She sighed with relief when the pressure against her aching breasts eased.

She untangled her hands and removed the offending garment, tossing it across the room.

Lucas's breath audibly hitched and she swore she heard him murmur, "Thank you gods," before he thumbed an already hard nipple. The electric sensation nearly had her jackknifing off the bed and the muscles behind her naval contracted violently. She watched his mouth slowly lower to cover the crest, whimpering long before contact.

When his hot, wet mouth covered her nipple, her whimpers turned to sobs, and when his teeth gently nibbled the tip, she didn't have words to describe the sounds she made.

"You taste better than anything I've ever had," he told her pulling back.

She cried out at the loss and clutched at him. The heat inside her had increased tenfold and she needed him.

"Hang on, honey," he soothed, shifting down her body while deftly avoiding her hands. Hot hands skimmed her waist, and he paused a moment to blow into her navel.

"Oh my God!"

Lucas laughed against her belly before pulling at her pants. She felt the button give and reached down, desperate to remove them.

He slapped at her hands. "I want to do this. Unwrap you like the gift you are."

Wow. If her body hadn't already melted like butter, those words would have done it. Her hands fell to her sides and fisted the covers beneath her as he unzipped the jeans and worked them down her hips.

"Faster," she ordered.

"You're killing me. You're so wet you've soaked through the pants."

She was so desperate for him the obvious proof of her arousal couldn't embarrass her—nor could the control-top grannie panties. Not that he waited to admire them. After his harsh, ground out admission, he jerked the panties and pants off her legs.

He reared back and his gaze swept her from head to toe. "You are so beautiful. You have no idea how long I've hoped for you."

Her heart turned over, and she reached for him again. Lucas had other ideas. With a gentle shove, he parted her legs. He took a moment to run his fingers through the tight brown curls between them before using thick fingers to separate her folds. He lowered his head and traced the ridge between her outer and inner labia with his tongue. She bucked against him and he switched sides, repeating the procedure before blowing a hot breath against her clit.

The sensation knifed through her, startling a scream from her throat. "Jesus Christ!"

Lucas didn't respond, lowering his head and drawing the aching nub into his mouth. She writhed and thrashed as one thick finger slid inside her. The combined sensation almost killed her. She was so close, so very close

Once again, Lucas pulled away, wrenching a sob of despair rather than pleasure from her chest.

"Not this time, honey. The first time you come for me, I want to feel it around my cock while I hold you in my arms."

He moved to take her mouth again, for a moment she tasted herself, then the kiss deepened and she tasted only him. She wound her legs around his waist and felt the uncomfortable rasp of silk against her thighs.

"You're boxers," she protested around his tongue.

He pulled back, and to her later amusement, grabbed the open slit in the front and ripped the offending garment from his body. She caught a glimpse of his cock, a moment before he settled back between her thighs, and had to admit, Elliot had nothing on Lucas. The image of her current lover's penis was emblazoned on her brain. Long, thick and crowned with a flared, mushroom head engorged with blood. The sight had her salivating.

Dwelling on the impressive image, she missed him shifting a hand down between her thighs. Only when he stroked her clit did she realize what he was doing.

"Ready honey?" he asked.

"I passed ready at dinner," she shot back.

He laughed, pressed a kiss to her forehead, and held her open as he gently pressed himself into her.

Her breath caught in her throat at the heavenly sting and burn.

He froze. "Am I hurting you?"

"No, but I'll hurt you if you stop."

"Honey, the only thing that could stop me is you."

She canted her hips. "That feels so good."

“Good doesn’t do it justice,” he ground out. He continued to push, stretching her. “I’m almost in.”

Good God, he was going to press against her tonsils shortly. Not that she was complaining. If anything, he wasn’t moving fast enough. To hurry him, she tightened her thighs around his flanks and thrust upwards. To her delight, he snarled and thrust hard.

The heavy weight of his balls rested against her ass as he paused. “You okay?”

“Never better,” she assured him.

And then he started to move.

Her eyes rolled back in her head as he buried his face in her neck and thrust. The hand between her legs shifted to caress the tight bundle of nerves that ached so badly, causing bolts of delightful electricity to shoot through her body.

He filled her so tightly she could feel every ridge, every vein. Time ceased and she existed in a vacuum of erotic pleasure. Nothing mattered but the sensations coursing through her.

Lucas seemed determined to draw it out. He knew how to touch her, how to stroke her clit, her breasts, with just enough pressure to keep her on the knife’s edge without letting her slip over to completion.

Finally, he muttered, “I can’t last any longer. I’m sorry.” And then he stroked her clit with more force as he shoved hard into her.

She splintered and shattered. A strangled scream burst from her throat and vibrant colors danced behind her eyes.

He pressed against her, held, and she felt him spurt deep within her. He pulled back, surged forward, and spurted again, before repeating the process a third and last time. She could have died happy feeling him come within her.

His arms trembled, but he levered himself up—and regrettably out of her—to offer a satisfied smile. “You’re amazing.”

The sincere honesty and pleasure in his eyes made her want to burst with pride. Instead she managed, “You’re pretty amazing yourself.”

He laughed and rolled to his side, pulling her with him. “Give me a few minutes and I’ll amaze you again.”

“Again?”

“I think there was something about exploring the lovemaking options offered by a floor.”

She laughed and cuddled against him, only to find herself amazed a few more times that night. Even if he never got around to removing that last sock.

Chapter Ten

Lucas blinked against the light streaming through his bedroom window. At some point one of them must have turned off the bedroom lamp. He glanced down and smiled at the sight of Jan tucked tightly against him. The corner of his eye caught sight of the shattered lamp on the floor. It brought a memory from the night to the forefront and had a smile playing across his lips.

"What's so funny?" she asked, groggily.

"Remembering what happened to the lamp."

To his delight, she turned bright red. "I'll replace it."

He snorted. "I was thinking about having the remains framed to honor last night."

Jan buried her head against his chest. "That was depraved."

"But fun," he agreed.

"Definitely."

The thread of embarrassment in her voice made him want to tease her. Unfortunately, his conscious wouldn't let him. They'd mated during the night. Fully and completely. He needed to let her know what had happened—and what he was. She deserved no less. Honestly, she had deserved to know before he bedded her.

"Jan, honey, there's something I have to show you."

"I saw it last night," she grumbled, snuggling closer.

"This is important." He shrugged the shoulder she'd burrowed against.

She raised her head, giving him an irritated, sleepy glare. "What?"

"I'm Tigre."

"That's nice," she muttered lowering her head.

"I'm a shapeshifter."

"Mmmm-hmmm."

Was she falling back asleep? He jostled the shoulder again. "I turn into a tiger."

She glared and flopped over onto her own pillow. "I saw that last night. Can I compliment you later?"

"I'm not talking about being a tiger in the sack."

"You were," she told the pillow. "I promise you were fantastic."

"Jan," he growled, shaking her shoulder. He'd always heard mates were difficult, but this was ridiculous. "Turn over and watch."

"If I do, will you let me sleep," she mumbled into the pillow.

"I promise."

She flipped over to face him with a disgruntled expression.

Feeling self-conscious he peeled the left sock from his leg.

"Wow. I'm impressed," Jan grumbled. "Can I go back to sleep now?"

"Just remember, I will never hurt you."

"I know." Her voice and eyes softened.

Before he could lose his nerve, he shifted. In the space of a few heartbeats, he went from two legs to four.

Jan jerked up and stared at him for a long moment, before letting loose a blood-curdling scream and racing for the door. She snagged a t-shirt from the clean clothes hamper by the door.

Lucas shifted, swore, grabbed his pants from the previous night and chased his mate down the hall, hopping into them as he went.

He followed his stubborn little mate out the backdoor. Instead of chasing her down the steps to the backyard, he leapt over the railing. He landed in front of her and received a strong right hook to his left eye. Staggering back more in surprise than pain gave Jan the opportunity to dash around him.

The growl that left his throat was issued in frustration, but she picked up the pace and he smelled the additional surge of adrenaline. Angry at himself, he ran behind her, intentionally not overtaking her. "Can we talk about this for a minute?"

"Stay away from me!" she shrieked without breaking stride.

"You're being ridiculous."

"I am not!"

"We need to talk about this." He took pride in the reasonable tone he used.

"Fine. Give me a call next week."

He swallowed a laugh at the acerbic response. Jan definitely had spunk. "I'd rather talk now. For crying out loud, I'm not going to hurt you."

"Ha!"

He was spared having to come up with a witty rejoinder for such a philosophical point, when she tripped over something. He sped up and caught her before she hit the ground. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Let go!"

He had a firm grip on her upper arms and had no intention of letting her loose. "Calm down. I just want to talk to you."

"There are no such things as werewolves," she screeched.

"I'm not a werewolf." He tried not to grind his teeth in frustration.

"Werewolves are nothing but legends grown out of historical misunderstanding of a medical condition. Hypertrichosis causes excess bodily hair that covers the entire dermis. Of course, lycanthropy refers to the psychological condition where a person believes himself to be a werewolf. But real werewolves are myths just like vampires—which I think have roots in a medical condition, too."

"This I've got to hear," a voice said from behind him.

Lucas glared over his shoulder at his Alpha. His mate had him so tied up in knots he hadn't sensed Damien's arrival.

A bewildered expression crossed Jan's face, but she responded to the statement. "There is a medical condition that I saw on a rerun of CSI where a woman had to consume the organs of a human or go insane. She used her dog to kill people for her so she could put them in the blender. I think the history of vampires ties into that somehow. I can't remember what that condition is called."

The completely bizarre tangent had Lucas wondering if their bond allowed Damien to order her as he would any other pride member. He put the thought into words. "Why are we discussing vampires?"

She glared at him. "You're the one who brought it up."

He was fairly certain he hadn't, but given the bizarreness of the conversation he decided not to debate the issue and muddy the waters further. "I'm not a vampire and I'm not a werewolf."

"Of course not. They don't exist."

"Honey, you watched me turn into a tiger, not a wolf."

"I did no such thing. What did you give me? A little peyote in the wine?"

The insult had him growling again. "I would never do that."

Damien began to laugh so hard he was choking.

"You're not helping," Lucas snarled.

"I'm not trying to," his Alpha told him cheerfully. "You've got to admire her ability to rationalize."

"That's what this is," Jan gasped and her face lit with understanding. "You aren't a polygamist cult. You're a cult that worships werewolves!"

"We are not wolves," he growled at her in frustration.

"Fine. You are a cult that worships weretigers."

"Polygamists?" Damien howled with laughter. "Have you met Caitlyn? She'd castrate me first."

The need to rake his hands through his hair made him release his stubborn mate. She took advantage of her freedom and leapt into the river. The distance she gained was pretty impressive, especially for the human.

"Stay back! Cats don't like water."

He glared at her, but didn't correct the obvious fallacy. "Jan, the water's cold. Come out and let's discuss this inside where it's warm."

"I'm perfectly warm right here."

"You are courting hypothermia right there," he snapped back. She wasn't, not yet. But she would be if she didn't come out soon.

"Maybe I should get Caitlyn," Damien suggested between guffaws.

"I can handle this," Lucas muttered.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

Lucas followed her gaze to see his Alpha stripping.

"Do you feel stoned right now?" Damien asked.

"I'm stone-cold sober," Jan assured them haughtily. "And you can put your clothes back on this minute, or I'm telling Caitlyn."

Lucas fixed his gaze on his recalcitrant mate when he felt the prickle of magic that accompanied a shift. Jan's eyes widened and she stumbled backwards.

"Maybe I'm not sober, yet," she whispered.

Lucas had enough. Taking advantage of her distraction, he strode into the water and slung her over his shoulder. Her bare legs felt like ice and the fists pounding his lower back didn't feel much warmer.

Ignoring her yells, he strode back to his house without so much as a nod to Damien. He figured the other man had a half-human wife and understood his frustrations.

He hadn't shut the door behind him when he'd chased the stubborn minx out into the woods. The living room was chilly, but still warmer than it was outside. He locked the door behind him then carried her through the house to the laundry room. After dumping her gently if unceremoniously onto the floor, he hauled sweats and a pair of socks out of the dryer and grabbed a towel and first aid kit from beneath the sink.

“Dry off. Get warm. Wash your feet in the sink—you’ve probably cut them—then come into the living room. I’m not going to hurt you, but we need to talk.”

Stalking from the utility room, he closed the door to give her a sense of privacy. Then he headed to the keypad and set the alarm. He wasn’t going to trust his volatile little mate as far as she could throw him.

Chapter Eleven

Jan sat on the counter watching Lucas whisking eggs in a ceramic mixing bowl. He'd been so offended by the peyote suggestion he demanded she watch him make breakfast so she could see the ingredients.

He dumped the eggs into the frying pan before asking, "How bad are your feet? Do I need to look at them?"

His eyes stayed on the spatula he used to scramble the eggs and she felt a little sliver of alarm that he wouldn't look at her. Had she offended him? Of course, she'd offended him. Why did it bother her so much?

The world had gone crazy and she was the only one who'd stayed sane. Or maybe the world had stayed sane and she'd gone crazy.

"Just a few scrapes. I doctored them and slapped a couple of bandages on."

He hesitated a brief moment before resuming the methodical movement of eggs over heat. Nervous energy had her swinging her legs lightly, which felt odd in male sweats. What was it about the cut of men's sweats that had the crotch hanging down between her knees?

"You're a scientist. I assume you are familiar with Occam's razor."

Cocking her head to the side, Jan studied his bland expression. "It's a theory that states the most obvious answer is usually the right one."

"You've watched both Damien and me turn into tigers. What does Occam's razor suggest?"

"It suggests you're a weretiger--"

"Tigre," he corrected.

"--but Chatton's anti-razor counters that there are too many variables in the world to ever reach an obvious answer." It was a weak argument, but she wasn't ready to admit out loud that she believed in ... Tigress. God help her.

He lifted the pan from the heat and used the spatula to divide the eggs onto the two plates that already held crisp bacon and toast slathered in melted butter. "Do you really believe I'd slip you a drug?"

Temper flared. "You already did!"

He met her eyes and she saw his surprise, then offense. "I didn't slip you the painkiller. I made certain you knew what I was doing."

"You forced a drug on me against my will!"

"And I'd do it again, but I would never slip you anything!"

"So it's okay to force drugs on me if I know you're doing it, but not if I don't?"

Incredulity weighted the question.

"I will not let you suffer intense pain when I can help. I make no apology for treating a patient too stubborn to see to her own health."

Jan's jaw dropped almost to the floor. "Oh my God! What country are you living in? What century are you living in?"

"I know you find this hard to believe, but I didn't like giving you the drug against your will—at least once I knew who you were. Damien, who is Alpha of this pack, ordered me to treat

you. I didn't like making you unhappy or making you feel powerless, but I liked the idea of your pain far less. I won't lie to you. I would have given you that shot even without his order."

She stared at him in disbelief. "I don't remember dropping acid this morning, but that's the only rational explanation I can come up with—Occam's razor or Chatton's anti-razor."

"Breakfast is ready," he announced, as if she couldn't see him putting the plates on the table.

She wiggled down from the counter, her stomach making unladylike demands, and shuffled to the table, keeping the too-big pants hiked up as best she could, before falling onto her meal like some prehistoric creature on a kill.

Lucas leaned back and watched her eat a moment, before nodding with obvious satisfaction.

Manners once again reared their nasty head. "Breakfast is delicious."

"I'm glad," he beamed at her, as though she weren't fantasizing skewering him with her fork.

"I'm still mad at you."

"I expected no less, but there are things we still need to discuss. We've gotten distracted by trivialities."

"Trivialities? Like you forcing drugs on me and thinking you're a shapeshifter?"

"Jan Honey, we are going to have to do a lot of adapting to each other's cultures. I recognize that. But I need to tell you some things that go beyond culture."

She didn't have the energy to brace herself. "Hit me."

"We're mated."

"I was there." The heat rushing to her face had her cursing in her mind.

"I don't mean we had sex, though that sealed the bond, I mean we are mated. Right now. The closest human equivalent is marriage, only there is no means of separating mates other than death."

Manners, she decided, were overrated. Propping an elbow on the table, she rested her chin in her palm and took a bite of toast. Around the mouthful, she managed to ask, "What fresh hell is this?"

His face wavered between amusement and insult, before settling into a neutral mien. "There is a ... metaphysical element to being a shifter. We are a different species. Until Caitlyn, it was believed humans and shifters couldn't procreate."

"Caitlyn? But her mother was raped Holy hell!"

"Hold it right there. I don't know what you're thinking, but for the record, Caitlyn's mother was the shifter, not her father."

Guilt niggled at Jan. She had assumed the rapist had been the shifter. "So Caitlyn can turn into a tiger, too?"

"No. But Patrice likely will."

"Wait. What did you mean 'until Caitlyn'?"

"Caitlyn is the first human/shifter hybrid known to have ever existed."

"And her parents mated to create her?" This was getting confusing. Hell, she'd abandoned any pretext of not believing him just to try and understand the conversation.

"No. I'm getting ahead of myself and things are getting mixed up." Lucas leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his hair. "Our mates are preordained by the gods. We know our mates as soon as we meet them and our mates know us."

"Sorry, I didn't have any gods whispering in my ear when I met you. In fact, you annoyed the hell out of me."

"Your nose was packed."

"I'm sure I'm going to love this explanation," she grumbled.

"Mating is a biochemical reaction tied to scent and pheromones. I knew you were mine the minute I got close enough to get a good whiff of you."

"How romantic."

"You were unable to scent me until the packing was removed. After that I stayed away long enough to let you heal some before you went into heat."

"Heat? Like a dog?"

"Like a Tigre. Have you ever reacted to a man like you did me last night?"

She jerked in her seat. "You knew? You knew that was going to happen? And it had nothing to do with either of us and everything to do with a chemical reaction?"

"No!" Alarm spread across his face. "It had everything to do with us being fated for one another. The pheromones are just a catalyst."

"A catalyst," she repeated, feeling stunned.

"Jan, I knew you were mine the moment I touched you. The fact that there's never before been a human mate for a Tigre wouldn't have stopped me from making you mine."

"If humans and Tigre—" she managed to say the word that time— "don't mate, I could just be a genetic anomaly. Maybe I just smell like your mate will."

It was a logical thought and one that sent daggers into her heart, no matter how mad she was at him.

"Damien went to consult with a matriarch—a wise woman who lives in solitude to better commune with the gods. She has been expecting you to come to us. You are the first human, first new blood, that will be joining the shifter lines. And, because you are a true mate, our children will be able to shift."

Her mind arrested on the word "children". "I'm on birth control!"

That brought a smile. "I didn't mean you were pregnant right now, but the children we will have. I've always wanted a large family."

She just stared at him a long moment. "I think I've reached information overload. I'm not sure I can process all this."

He reached across the table and covered one of her hands with his own. "I know this is overwhelming, and I know you need time, but I need you to know something. I will never willingly cause you emotional pain, and I'll cut my hand off before I raise it to you."

Sincerity radiated from him, hitting her like Chernobyl. "I know. I want you to promise me that you will never drug me against my will again."

"I can't do that. I can promise I'll never drug you without your knowledge."

"Stalemate," she announced, too overwhelmed to argue.

"You must be exhausted. Why don't we go back to bed? We can talk more after a nap."

"Maybe I should head back. Caitlyn's probably worried about me."

Gentleness shone in his eyes. "Honey, she knows you are my mate, and she's been through the heat and fever of mating herself. She understands."

Jan swallowed. Somehow, taking a nap with the man felt more intimate than what they'd done during the night—the aftereffects from which she was still feeling. "I need some time..."

"I promise I won't make any demands on you. I just need to hold you. Stay."

He issued stay as a command, but Jan saw the vulnerability in him. Too tired to let logic rule her actions, she acquiesced.

Cuddled in his bed with the heavy curtains drawn, she nestled against him, too tired to feel more than contentment. Fortunately, contentment was enough to let her slide into sleep.

Chapter Twelve

"You thought I had joined a cult?" Caitlyn demanded as Jan crossed the threshold to her home.

"I see Damien's been flapping his gums."

"A polygamist cult? Have you lost your mind?"

"It makes a lot more sense than the weretiger explanation," she defended weakly, before going on the offense. "Maybe my best friend could have mentioned I was walking into a trap last night."

"Dinner with Lucas was not a trap..." Caitlyn wrinkled her nose. "It was a"

Jan crossed her arms under her breasts. "I'm waiting."

"An opportunity."

"An opportunity?" Jan's mouth fell open and she began sputtering.

"And a great opportunity at that. Last night you mated the perfect man for you. You are now part of the Pride and you'll live next door to me." Caitlyn flung her arms around Jan and squeezed. "Who says happily ever after is only for fairy tales?"

Had the whole world gone mad or just this corner of it? "Jesus Christ! I barely know the man. My life has gone insane and you are imagining me moving in next door and joining the freakin' Junior League. Tell me, are we going to trade baking recipes too?"

Caitlyn pulled back enough to look her in the face. "I'm rushing things. I'm so sorry. I was just so thrilled when it turned out you are truly Lucas's mate. I haven't been thinking about how overwhelming you must find all of this."

Jan accepted the comfort of another hug. Then found herself being dragged to the comfortable living room. Caitlyn threw open the bar and pulled out two margarita glasses, tequila, mix, and salt.

"It's not even noon yet," she protested.

"It's after two," Caitlyn corrected, before turning to waggle her eyebrows. "You must have lost track of time."

Shit. She could feel the blush that crawled from her collarbone to her scalp. It was hot enough to set fire to the entire house. The nap had ended in a rather carnal pursuit that she couldn't possibly have described to a priest in confession.

Jan eyed the glasses as her friend rimmed them with a lime and dipped them in salt. "What happened to not drinking while nursing?"

"I'm having a virgin. You're getting the real McCoy."

Two drinks and half a bag of tortilla chips later, Jan said. "My life has spiraled out of control. No, not spiraled. Spirals are pretty and organized. My life has ... scribbled out of control."

"Scribbled? Maybe you should ease back on the tequila."

"I can't keep sitting back and watching things happen to me. I have to do something."

"You did do something. You got to safety. You came to us."

"I ran away."

"I know better than that. Asking for help is harder for you than taking a beating. It's why you've been so resistant to accepting it. Not to mention how crabby you are."

Jan glared. "I'm always crabby."

"Fine. Not to mention how much crabbier you are."

"Better."

"Thanks." Caitlyn's eyes narrowed. "I know you're not thinking about going back to Carey right now."

"I have to reclaim some control in my life, or at least being active rather than reactive."

"You know that part in a horror movie, when the screaming chick runs up the stairs and not out the front door? That's your current plan."

Jan laughed and topped off her drink with the dregs from the shaker. "Give me some credit. I'm not running up the stairs, but I have to actually do something. I need to stop being Elliot's victim."

"I agree but--"

"But what? We all know he broke in and vandalized my place, but no one can prove it. He's been in my apartment before, so any prints could have been left from then. Plus, two minor assault charges aren't going to put him in jail. He'll plea to probation."

Caitlyn looked like she wanted to argue, but was too good a friend to lie. They both knew Elliot wouldn't spend a night in jail.

"I need to put my life back in order, and I've got to get back to work."

"I still don't want you to go back there. I think it's stupid."

"At what magical moment does reclaiming my life stop being labeled stupid and start being called brave?"

Caitlyn worried her lower lip. "I don't know."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, before Caitlyn asked, "I can't stop you, can I?"

"Nope."

"You know Lucas is coming with you."

"I don't expect him to do that."

She snorted. "I'd like to see you try and stop him."

Chapter Thirteen

Lucas gripped the steering wheel so hard he left permanent indentions and clenched his teeth to lock the growl in his throat. The first part of the drive to Carey had passed in pleasant conversation. He'd enjoyed learning Jan's past. Who knew surly women could be so sexy?

The plan had seemed so simple. He'd make her comfortable by talking about inconsequential things then segue into a casual exchange of life stories. When the time felt right, he'd intended to shift the conversation to their mating. She needed to understand the metaphysical bond they shared.

But she'd blindsided him. "Did you just ask me if I wanted to date you?"

Jan glowered at him. "It's a reasonable question. If we are going to keep having sex, we need to be adults and talk about it."

He counted to ten. "We are going to keep having sex for the rest our lives. We're mated."

"Arrogant, aren't you?"

He shot a glance at her from the corner of his eye, but still couldn't tell if she was teasing or just pissed. He counted to twenty. "No. I'm not arrogant. I'm humbled and grateful that the gods gifted my life with you. But there are things you don't understand about the differences between humans and Tigre."

"I can't believe you just said that," she snapped.

"About you not understanding?"

"No, about you being humbled and gifted."

"Why not?" He cut another wary glance at her, taking in her closed off body language.

"Because that's the most wonderful thing anyone has ever said to me."

Her furious tone took him aback. "You're mad at me for saying something wonderful?"

"No, I'm upset because now I can't be mad at you for being arrogant."

"You're mad at me because you can't be mad at me."

"You bet."

She sounded so serious—hell she was serious—he couldn't stop himself from throwing back his head and laughing out loud. The ridiculousness of the situation quashed his outrage.

"I'm always going to have to be on my toes around you, aren't I?"

"Not at all." She smiled sweetly. "It would be better if you were on your knees."

Caught off guard by her humor and the double entendre, he laughed again. What had ever given him the idea he could control a conversation with her? "Trust me. I intend to spend a lot of time there."

Jan rewarded him with a hot blush before saying, "Then we need to talk. We weren't responsible when ... before. I'm clean but will submit to a blood test if you'd be more comfortable."

"Tigre aren't susceptible to STDs," he assured her. "I want you to be comfortable, though. I can't submit to a general blood test. We don't let humans check our blood, but we do have our own labs. It will take a little time to get the results, but I want you to have any reassurance you need."

"Thank you, but if you say you can't get STDs, I'll believe you."

Her tone didn't convey a ringing acceptance of his word, but he'd take what he could get. Besides, they had more important things to discuss. "About this 'dating' you suggested--"

"I know the long distance makes things complicated, but I need to get back to work for as long as I still have a job. I'm going to have to start sending out resumes ASAP. I'll probably be looking all over. I could end up closer to you, but I may wind up out of state. You should know between Elliot and the job situation, now is not a good time to get involved with me."

Do not try and rescue her. Caitlyn's solid advice warred with his tiger's instincts. He fought the tiger and won ... barely. "Jan, we aren't just dating. We're mated. The bond is there. Prolonged separation will cause physical deterioration and intense discomfort."

Jan frowned. "So we'll see each other every weekend. If this thing doesn't work out, we'll just have to suffer while the bond breaks."

Heaviness weighted his heart. Her words underscored the cultural chasm between them. And her lack of understanding was his fault alone.

"Honey, every weekend is not going to be enough. Even every other day is hard on a mated pair. There are measures that can be taken for a separation, but those measures are temporary and don't work long term."

After a protracted silence, Jan asked in a small voice, "So we need to end the mating now?"

Dammit. He was fucking this up. "No. We can't end the mating. Now or ever. The mating is a gift of the gods." He raked a hand through his hair and focused on the traffic picking up around him. "We need to be together every day."

The temperature in the car plummeted. "So, if I don't fuck you everyday, I suffer."

Shocked, he jerked the steering when he turned towards his mate. Quickly returning to his lane, he waved an apology to the driver giving him the one finger salute. "No, you don't have to fuck me to avoid pain. We need to spend about five minutes together a day, even if it's just on an elevator together."

"It's a hell of a drive to Carey just to ride an elevator."

He had to force himself to stop grinding his teeth. "If you stay here, so will I. I can pick up ER shifts downtown pretty easily."

"You'll stay just because I'm here?"

"Of course."

"Where will you stay?" she challenged.

"I'm assuming you have a couch." He was assuming she had a bed, but didn't feel it was necessary to mention that.

"You plan on sleeping on my couch for the rest of your life if this doesn't work out?"

He wanted to bash his head against the steering wheel. Instead, he counted to fifty. "Jan, I know this seems strange and probably a bit surreal for you. I'm trying to be understanding, but you need to know that the tiger is part of me, and having you constantly rejecting us is agitating him."

"Are you threatening me?"

Beneath the bravado he heard the fear. "I'm not threatening you. Neither I nor my tiger would ever hurt you. When my tiger instincts flare up, it makes it hard for me to have a calm conversation. My emotions stir up."

Jan chewed that over a moment. "I'm not trying to provoke you. I guess I need a better understanding about what it means to be Tigre."

She sounded subdued, but the scent of fear dissipated which calmed him somewhat.

"Honey, I'll answer any questions you have about shifters—"

"Shifters?"

"Yes, there is a lot more out there than just Tigre. I'll be happy to tell you all about it, but first I need you to understand what our mating means."

"It sounds like we're stuck together no matter what we want."

"You are thinking like a human, but things in the shifter world work a little differently. The gods create two people who are made for each other. We are compatible and you'll find me very easy to love if you let yourself. Not that we won't have fights or disagreements, but ultimately, you'll know I'll always be there for you and I know the same about you. We'll make each other happy."

"How do you know I'll be there for you?"

"I just do. I don't know if it's faith or instinct, but I believe it. I believe in you."

"No pressure there," she sniped.

"I know you are thinking of this as the beginning of a possible relation, but to me—and in the eyes of my people—we are wed. You're my wife. I don't expect you to just accept that. I intend to court you, but I don't want you to suffer during the process."

"I think I'd enjoy being courted," she confessed.

His heart turned over. Before he could promise to sweep her off her feet, she said, "Here."

"Here?"

"Here," she repeated, gesturing frantically at the passenger's window.

"Here what?"

"Well, now it's there," she snapped, twisting to look out the back window.

"Huh?"

"You missed the exit."

Chapter Fourteen

Jan hid a smile as she led a grumbling Lucas up the side staircase that led to her floor. Tucked into the back corner of the building, it afforded her a sense of privacy she appreciated. With only one wall against a neighbor's—and that wall in the kitchen/dining room—she could indulge in some loud fantasies with the handsome man behind her.

She began rooting in her purse, searching for her keys. When she finally located them, they'd reached her door. Lucas clapped a hand over her mouth and took the keys from her hand. To her surprise she didn't immediately panic at being grabbed.

"I smell pizza and hear the television—a baseball game. Someone's in there."

Jan's muscles locked and fear stiffened her spine.

Lucas released her mouth, but wrapped a supportive arm around her as he leaned forward to examine the lock. In a voice so low, she could hardly hear him, he said, "It hasn't been picked. Who else has a key to the place?"

"Management and Elliot." Shame swamped her. She should have had the foresight to change the locks. God, she was stupid.

Lucas squeezed her gently. "It's okay, honey. I'll take care of this."

"I'll call the police." She pulled her mobile off her belt.

Lucas shook his head. "Call Damien. I smell Ketamine."

"Special K?"

He shook his head and she tried not to be distracted by the odd light refraction in his eyes. Knowing he was a tiger and seeing the partial shift were two different things. Her mind shied away from the preternatural aspects of her ... boyfriend? Husband?

"It's high grade and not diluted. I also smell gun oil. Whoever is in there is waiting for a Tigre or a shifter of some kind with a tranq gun. We can't get the police involved. Go back downstairs and call Damien."

She balked. It was stupid and moronic, but she did it anyway. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to stay here and listen. See if I can tell anything."

"And what if someone opens the door—" One day she was going to learn to keep her mouth shut.

The door swung open and a tall, slender man she'd never seen before appeared. He wore a pair of scruffy jeans and a faded wifebeater, in his left hand hung a tall kitchen garbage bag. Well, at least whoever was squatting in her apartment was taking out the trash.

The look of surprise on the man's hawkish face made it appear as misshapen as a caricature. Jan and the stranger froze, staring at each other for a full second. Lucas had no such deer-in-the-headlight moment. He lunged at the man, but before he could grab him, the caricature let out a startled yelp.

The croaking sound brought Elliot running from the living room. A short man with a developing beer gut, her ex-fiancé inspired little more than a vague feeling of disgust—until she saw the gun in his hand.

"Run—" Lucas growled over his shoulder at the same time she shouted "Gun!"

Lucas was fast, but not even preternatural speed could out run a bullet—or a dart, she realized a moment after the soft pop sounded.

A fletched end stuck out of Lucas's shoulder, but he didn't fall down like people did in the movies. Instead, he roared in rage and staggered forward, trying to fight as his body refused to cooperate. The seconds it took him to slump to the floor felt interminable.

Sick at the sight, Jan tried to move to his side, her emotions overriding her common sense. Apparently Caitlyn was right. She was the moron running up the stairs.

Her attempt to check on Lucas came to a screeching halt when Elliot turned the gun on her.

"About damned time you showed up," he muttered. "Get in here."

Wifebeater apparently didn't think she was complying fast enough, because he caught her arm, hauled her across the threshold and slammed the door shut. He tossed her against the wall hard enough for her head to dent the drywall. Black roses bloomed before her eyes and pain exploded in her skull.

Shit. She hadn't even had the intelligence to scream. Too late to do anything about that, so she went on the offense. "What the hell is going on? Have you gone insane?"

Moving gingerly to keep her head from falling off, she shifted to kneel beside Lucas. Satisfied that he was breathing, she yanked the offending dart from his shoulder.

"Do you think she knows?" Wifebeater asked.

"I wouldn't have asked if I knew," she snapped out.

"Doubt it. It's not something they would share with a hu—with her."

She had no doubt they were debating her knowledge of Tigre. Her eyes fell on the keys Lucas had dropped. She grabbed them and shoved them into her purse—using the obvious action to disguise her thumbing Caitlyn's home number. God bless speed dial.

Leaving the purse open, she decided feigning ignorance was the smart move. She glared at the two men, before pinning her gaze on Elliot. "You are in violation of the restraining order."

Both men laughed.

"Restraining order?" Elliot snorted. "God you're dumb."

She bristled. "I'm not the one courting jail time and shooting a doctor."

"Hot damn!" Wifebeater exclaimed. "We got their doctor."

"Been better if we got their leader. Hell, after all the work I had to do, we should have gotten two of them."

"You're never satisfied. This is more than enough to force our fathers to let us into the society as full members. We've more than proved ourselves."

Elliot grunted before fixing Jan with a reptilian stare.

"Aren't you a little old to be mixed up in some bizarre initiation? Don't most men outgrow this after rushing a frat? Or are you trying to become Water Buffalos like in the Flintstones?" Jan hoped her expression was outraged and not terrified. Her assumptions strained credibility, but then Elliot had never afforded her great intellect, likely because he had a mediocre mind.

"What are we going to do about her?" Wifebeater asked with an unnecessary head jerk towards Jan.

She wanted to roll her eyes. Apparently, the dynamic duo planned to ambush her with a Tigre escort, but had given no thought as to what to do with her. When she'd chosen to settle down with Elliot, she'd picked him because he'd had little flash, but a steady job and a plodding, responsible approach to life. Good, faithful husband material.

Clearly, she had a real gift for judging men.

"If we let her go, she'll go to the police," Wifebeater said.

Elliot considered it. "If she goes to the police, they will take care of her."

What a prince. He figured he could just sit back and let someone else "take care of her."

Elliot procured some rope while Wifebeater held the gun on her. Jan briefly considered all sorts of heroic, butt-kicking moves she could make, but the unfortunate realization that she was a real person without a stunt double saved her from idiocy.

"Here." Elliot shook a length of twisted nylon at her. "Tie him up."

She loosely looped the rope around Lucas's wrist.

"Tighter," Wifebeater growled.

She obligingly tightened the ropes. The morons had clearly never seen how sharp a tiger's claws and teeth were. Her greatest concern about tying Lucas was the rope would get caught in his teeth—like popcorn kernels or stringy chicken.

A pounding at the door startled a squawk out of Jan.

Wifebeater jumped then clamped a hand over Jan's mouth. "Shut up," he snarled, before telling Elliot, "You'd better get that."

The knocking became near frantic and a voice kept calling, "Hello! Hello! Anyone home?"

Trapped in the small entrance, it took a few moments for the two bungling bastards to drag their victims behind the door in such a way to effectively hide them from the panic-stricken door-beater.

Elliot secured the door's chain before cracking it. "Yes?"

"Thank God you're home. I'm Peter from downstairs. Water's pouring from my ceiling. Is your tub overflowing or your dishwasher running?"

"No," Elliot snapped. "No water is on in here."

"Can you cut off your valves to be safe? The building services guy is on his way."

Elliot turned to shoot Wifebeater a panicked look. Within a split second of the redirection of his attention, the door exploded inward.

An extremely tall man, skinny enough for Jan to think anorexic, exploded through the door. The man was taller than anyone Jan had ever known. He was otherwise unremarkable except for the furry forearms and clawed ... paws?

In moments, the two assailants were down and Fuzz-arms was slicing through the taut knots she'd just secured.

"Easy, Jan. I'm a friend of Lucas's. Damien and his enforcers are on their way."

She stared at his hairy arms, which melted into spindly human forearms and freckled hands. "You aren't a tiger."

"I'm Ursidae," he told her gently. "A bear shifter. Why don't you close the door and get me a wet washcloth?"

The back of her mind knew Peter was giving her busy work, but she followed his instructions. The door settled back into place, bent, but lockable. By the time she'd managed to work the bathroom faucet with her trembling hands and returned, Pete had removed Lucas's shirt and carried the shorter man to the couch. Or maybe he'd carried him to the couch and then removed his shirt.

The—holy fuck—bear shifter took the dripping cloth and wrung it out over the pot of a near-dead philodendron.

"Maybe you should sit down," he suggested.

She took his advice and didn't spare a glance at the bound, gagged, and unconscious men by the door—damn the bear was fast. Sitting beside Lucas on her too small couch, she asked, "Who are you?"

Peter smiled and sat in the chair across from her. "I'm a friend of your mate's. He saved my sister's life—and my niece's—when she had complications from labor. He asked me to move in after your apartment was vandalized."

"So you picked up and moved?" Her mind seemed to be operating from a distance, and she could feel herself starting to tremble.

"The doc's a real popular guy. Because of him, we've had more live births in the past few years than in the previous decade. The Ursidae would do anything for him. Keeping an eye on his mate's place was nothing."

"Uh-huh." Yep. She was firing on all cylinders.

"You know, you aren't looking that great."

"I can't imagine why not," she muttered

Peter apparently missed the sarcasm. "I'm sure it's because of the break-in and stress. Maybe you should lie down."

"Shouldn't we do something for Lucas?"

"We'll have to analyze what they shot him with first. Then we can treat him. For now, his color is normal and his pulse strong. It's a good sign."

"He said it was Ketamine."

"One of the men on the floor?"

"No. Lucas. He said he smelled it."

"Ah. He'd know." Peter nodded. "He'll be fine. They probably gave him enough to knock the tiger down. That means, he'll sleep quite a while, but should be fine. Did they say anything?"

She followed the incline of Peter's head to the two men on the floor. "They wanted their daddies to let them join some society as full members."

His eyes narrowed. "He said the 'Society'?"

She nodded and stared at his hand for a moment when Peter extended the washcloth.

"For his forehead," the bear prodded.

She took it and draped it across Lucas's forehead. It took four tries to lay it in the right position. She heard Peter talking behind her, but she couldn't process his words. It took a moment to realize he was on a mobile phone. He knelt before her, closing the phone, before wrapping a blanket around her.

"Maybe you should lie down."

That sounded like a brilliant idea. Tuning out the rest of what Peter said, she draped herself across Lucas's chest and closed her eyes.

Chapter Fifteen

Jan awoke in the same bedroom at Caitlyn's where she'd spent her first night. She didn't awake in a better mood this time around. After being poked and prodded and grilled by Damien, hauled back to his house like ratty luggage, and turned over to Caitlyn's smothering ... Damien had better hope she didn't get her hands on a gun.

Never a morning person, it took her a few moments to realize there was a warm wall of flesh plastered against her back. A deep breath brought Lucas's unique scent of wildness and spice. Savoring the sensation of snuggling back against him, her temper sparked at the interruption of Caitlyn's voice.

"How are you feeling?"

Embarrassed at getting all weak-kneed. Humiliated by my relationship with Elliot. Terrified at how worried I am about Lucas. What she said-growled-was, "Fine."

Caitlyn ignored her obvious displeasure. "We need to talk before Lucas wakes up." Jan tried to sit up, but Lucas tightened his arm around her waist and grumbled in his sleep.

"Is he going to be okay?" she demanded unconsciously echoing Caitlyn's stage whisper. "He'll be fine, but there are some things you need to know about dealing with him right now."

"What are you talking about?"

"He's not human."

"Somehow, I've caught onto that."

"He's going to be weird when he wakes up."

"Because he was so normal before," Jan sniped.

Caitlyn shook her head. "I'm not joking. He's not human and his mate was threatened. The tiger will surface, even in human form, hell bent on protecting his mate."

"Okay?"

"Jan, Lucas is going to behave like a Neanderthal. I know it goes against every bone in your body, but roll with it. His primal instincts will have taken over. Once his cognitive functions reassert themselves, he'll return to normal."

"What do you mean by 'Neanderthal'?" Jan demanded, no longer whispering. Jesus, how much more could she take before they hauled her drooling and gibbering to a mental ward? "If you think I'm going to let him drag me off by the hair--"

"I promise you, no hair dragging," a voice rumbled in her ear.

"You're awake," Jan inanely accused him, sitting up.

Caitlyn asked an intelligent question. "How are you feeling?"

To Jan's surprise, he leveled a glare at Caitlyn. "I'm starving."

The Tigress hesitated, weighing the wounded tiger with her gaze before rising. "I'll fetch some breakfast and be right back."

When the door closed, Jan demanded, "Why are you angry at Caitlyn?"

"I'd be angry at anyone who tried to make you fear me."

"I'm not afraid of you."

He raised his brows. "That's why you ran from my bed and jumped into a frigid river? Because you weren't afraid?"

Jan stuck her nose in the air. "I wasn't afraid. I was ... startled." The look on his face clearly challenged her creative recollection. She went on the offensive. "What was Caitlyn trying to warn me about?"

"She's concerned about my reaction to the danger you were in. And your reaction to my reaction."

"You seem ... okay."

He grimaced. "I'm not. It's taking effort. I want to lock you in a vault and keep you safe."

Jan felt her body bristle like an angry cat. Lucas held up a hand.

"I know you are far too independent and if I did something like that, you'd be miserable. If either of us is going to suffer, it's going to be me."

"I don't want you to suffer." Her stomach turned over at the thought, but she recovered quickly. "Not that I'm going to let you coddle me."

He smiled—or grimaced. "My tiger will settle when he's sure you are safe." He gave a pointed look around. "I remember being shot and telling you to run ...?" he prompted.

Figuring he'd get the details later, she opted for a concise summary. "Your friend Peter showed up and took the two men by surprise."

A satisfied smile played about Lucas's mouth. "You weren't hurt."

It wasn't a question, but she answered anyway. "Bump on the head, but otherwise not even a chipped nail."

Amusement danced in his eyes when he glanced at her jagged nails. "Glad to know that."

"Damien brought Elliot and his friend back with us," Jan said quietly. "He has questions about some society. He won't tell me what he plans on doing with them."

Lucas's eyes slitted. "Elliot's here?"

Shit. Had she left her brain in Carey?

He jerked suddenly. "Did you say the Society?"

"That was Peter's reaction, too. What's the Society?"

Lucas sat up and hauled her into his lap, tension radiating. "Throughout history, two groups have hunted us, The Society for Preternatural Research and the Coalition. It's why most shifters immigrated to the new world. The Society has always been well-funded from the private sector. They've hunted us to make use of us as lab rats for the sake of 'science'."

"And the Coalition?"

"They are a religious group that believes our kind are descended from demons and must be destroyed."

She processed that for a moment and decided to shelve the crazy religious weirdos for the time being. "Are you sure that's what Elliot meant by Society?"

"Yes, but Damien will confirm it."

Her stomach turned over at the satisfaction in his voice.

"Of the two, the Society is less ... ruthless. The Coalition has its roots in the Spanish Inquisition."

"You didn't know they knew about your ... pack?"

"Pride," he corrected. "I didn't know they were in this state. In fact, we've only had rumors of them in the big cities: New York, Chicago, Los Angeles."

"What about the Coalition?"

"They've always been secretive, but more pervasive. They recruit and motivate on fear using religion as a weapon."

"Are they here too?"

"Not that we've seen, but we'll be stepping up our vigilance."

Coldness seeped into her very bone marrow. She'd been so focused on how the Tigre affected her own life, she hadn't given a thought to the difficulties they suffered simply for being different. Or the danger they faced. "How scared should I be?"

He crushed her in bear hug and fervently whispered into the hair at the crown of her head, "I will never let them harm you."

She'd meant how worried should she be for him, but the vehemence in his voice She took a moment to savor the caring, the feeling that she was important to him, the joy of mattering. Then he shifted, lowering his mouth to her ear and rational thought fled.

Three days later, she did her best to ignore the news article on Elliot and his friend who'd been hiking in the northwestern mountains when they were mauled to death by wild animals.

* * * *

Two weeks later, Lucas stood by the window, brooding. Jan sat on the porch staring at the vista, but he doubted she admired the beauty. Her mind seemed a million miles away.

While a part of him rejoiced that she'd quit her job and was "staying" with him, her obvious unhappiness ate at his soul.

For reasons he couldn't fathom—reasons generated exclusively by that second X chromosome—she both blamed herself for leading the Society to their Pride and, axiomatically, for involving herself with a man who'd sought her out to put her friends in danger.

Logic screamed Elliot had intentionally endeared himself to her to gain access to the Pride, making himself into a close-to-ideal-man for her. Unfortunately, he could think of no way to point that out without sounding like an ass. Don't worry, Jan. He only sought you out, courted and promised to marry you so he could get close to Caitlyn's Pride. It had nothing to do with you. No reason to feel guilty that you fell for it.

Frustrated, he turned from the window. It was afternoon, but dusk fell quickly in the winter months. He poured two glasses of red wine and carried them outside. Settling into the chaise beside her, he wordless passed her one.

She murmured her thanks and took a sip. Closing her eyes, she tipped her head back. "I got offered my old job back."

His heart accelerated. The commute from his house was negligible and in the opposite direction of the heavy traffic. He wanted to jump and embarrass himself by bursting into the Snoopy dance. He managed to restrain himself. "I thought you loved your old job."

"I did."

"Didn't you want to do field work again?"

"Yes."

"But you aren't pleased with getting what you wanted?"

She sighed. "It's not that simple."

He waited. When she didn't elaborate, he prodded. "How is it 'not simple'?"

"Now I have to protect all of you. They've already used me to get to you once."

Taken aback, his brain took a moment to process her logic. When she'd been less than enthusiastic, he'd sheltered a small fear that the recalcitrance stemmed from being his mate. The fact she wanted to protect his people warmed his heart. "Few humans know we exist—humans

we consider friends. We don't expect them to do anything to protect us, save keep our secret. Quite the opposite."

She glared at him. "How many of them have led a shifter into a Society ambush?"

"Humans who know about us are at risk. We guard them as best we can. We don't expect them to guard us."

"What if I screw up and let something slip. You have no idea what heavy drinking is done when archaeologists get together."

"Honey, if you are that drunk, no one will believe—"

Her gasp of horror cut him off midsentence. She shot wide-eyes to him. "What if I discover evidence relating to shifters? I'll have to lie or omit it. All that information could be lost forever."

Inspiration struck. "Not necessarily. We have our own historians and librarians. Having an archaeologist who can expand our knowledge ... In fact, we have some sacred sites that we know very little about."

Jan cocked her head and interest gleamed in her eyes. "Really?"

"We fund our researchers well, running all contributions through several companies and ultimately to the Consortium."

"Consortium?"

"It's got a long title, but I can't remember it. Everyone just calls it the Consortium. It's an inter-shifter research group that devotes itself to the myriad issues facing shifters and the areas of shifter life that must remain hidden."

"Such as medical," she guessed.

"Medical is one of the fields," he agreed. "But we are still trying to understand our origins, and unlike humans, we won't sacrifice science if it contradicts religion. We believe science and religion are two sides of the same coin. If science changes, religion does, so our scientists and religious experts both work for the Consortium."

"As you do?"

He shook his head. "Nope. I'm a doctor. Granted I went to medical school intending to go to work for them, but I discovered I preferred being a healer to a researcher. I still work with them. Unlike humans, we have no privacy laws where medical information is concerned. What affects one of us affects all of us. So, I participate in the research that way."

"Wow. That really chafes me. It makes logical sense, but it really goes against the grain."

He smiled, but could feel the grimness in it. "You've been blessed to live in a world where individual rights supersede the needs of the whole."

"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few ... or the one," she muttered.

He blinked. "Did you just quote Star Trek to me?"

"Star Trek Two: The Wrath of Khan."

Lucas shook his head. "Just when I thought you couldn't get any sexier."

"You think quoting Star Trek is sexy?"

"Hell yes. You want to get me really hot, try quoting Star Wars or Top Gun."

"The Department of Defense regrets to inform you that your sons are dead because they were stupid."

"Be still my heart," he growled playfully and moved to lean over her.

She slapped a palm against his chest. "Not so fast Goose."

"I'm Goose?"

"Of course," she grinned. "I'm Maverick."

"I look forward to seeing how much of a maverick you are," he teased, letting the heat of his desire flood his eyes.

"I'll blow Tom Cruise out of the sky," she promised. "But first we are going to finish our discussion of the Consortium."

With Jan smiling beneath him in the fading light of day, he was having a tough time recalling the conversation. Something about the Consortium. Oh, yeah. "They will jump at the chance to work with you."

"I'll have to be gone a few weeks a year on digs at these sites," she warned.

"Sounds like fun."

"I thought we'd suffer if separated." Suspicion had her eyes narrowing at him.

With effort he swallowed a grin. He'd never get anything past his brilliant mate. "You would if I didn't go with you."

"You'd go with me?"

"Tigre are a hearty bunch and more of us are getting into the medical field. Damien will spare me a few weeks each year to accompany my mate on a dig."

"It's something to consider," she hedged. "If he'll let us go together."

He heard the excitement in her voice. "I promise nothing will stand in our way if you want to go on a dig."

Her face lit up. "I accept that promise."

Unable to contain the emotion burning in his chest, he murmured, "I love you."

She gave him a wicked smile and said, "I know," before capturing his mouth in a passionate kiss.

The ring in his pocket burned his left cheek, but he gritted his teeth. Now was not the time to corner her. She'd all but admitted to being his mate. The ring could wait until she was comfortable. But any woman who could quote Goose and a scene from Star Trek back-to-back would never escape him.

The End