

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Foxfire

Margaret Carter

A man and woman who shun human contact discover they are meant for each other, when Tabitha turns to her mountaintop neighbor, Kenji, for help in finding her runaway sister.

Tabitha hides away from the world to escape the pain of other people's emotions invading her mind. Kenji lives alone in a mountain cabin because he fears his untamed shape-shifting power. He is half kitsune — part man and part fox.

Only by sharing the secrets of their wild talents can these two lonely people unite and become whole.

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Margaret L. Carter

Author's Note

All the powers attributed to Kenji come from authentic Japanese mythology. Two Internet sources I used for kitsune legends are Kitsune Lore, www.comnet.ca/~foxtrot/kitsune and The Kitsune Page, www.coyotes.org/kitsune.

Chapter One

Anger and frustration hammered at Tabitha like a fist pounding on a door. She felt like clamping her hands over her ears to shut out the racket, but plugging her ears couldn't block noise that existed only in her brain. Besides, her sister would get the wrong idea. It wasn't Chloe's voice that made Tabitha's head hurt, but the feelings behind the words.

"I know damn well you don't want me here, Tabby."

Tabitha winced at that nickname. The kittenish overtones clashed with the negative emotions and made her skull jangle even worse. "I never said that." She kept her tone low in hopes of soothing Chloe. Sometimes her curse of perceiving other people's emotions enabled her to give them a gentle nudge in a different direction.

"You don't have to. If I'd phoned first instead of just showing up at the door, would you have invited me to come?" Her anger bounced off the walls like a steel sphere in an old-fashioned pinball machine. Her chin quivered like a sulky toddler's, oddly contrasting with her porcupine-spiked, blood-red hairdo, the black jeans and halter top, and the silver ankh necklace. Tabitha, with her brown hair, light sprinkle of freckles and discount-store wardrobe, felt drab by contrast, but she liked herself that way, comfortably inconspicuous.

"I might have tried to talk you into making up with Mom and Dad. That doesn't mean I don't want you around."

"You don't want anybody around. Why else are you hiding on a mountaintop in the middle of nowhere?" A wave of Chloe's hand, fingernails polished with silver glitter, encompassed the living room with its wood paneling, braided rug, bare ceiling beams and the pine trees visible through the window.

"Not quite in the middle of nowhere. There's a town less than half an hour away." Tabitha rubbed her forehead. She couldn't deny she lived in the Blue Ridge Mountains, though on more of a hillside than a mountaintop, to keep her distance from other people. That didn't mean she never wanted to see her family again. She just wanted to confine that contact to small doses. It didn't help that her parents suspected she was a little nuts. Chloe, who seemed to have a faint trace of the emotion-sensing talent Tabitha had inherited in such unwanted abundance from their grandmother, might have understood, except that most of the time she preferred to deny any such ability existed. "Look, Chloe, I understand the folks can be a giant pain about guys and stuff. And I don't mind having you hide out here for a while. But aiding and abetting you with outright disobeying them is a whole 'nother thing."

"Bottom line, you won't help me."

"I thought letting you crash here was helping. Bottom line, I won't let you meet your boyfriend in my house. Mom and Dad would never let me hear the end of it." Their parents would phone from Norfolk and badger her for hours about supporting her little sister's rebellion. Listening to them yell hurt less when distance kept her from sensing their anger directly, but she still wanted to avoid the ordeal. Chloe's anger felt almost as harsh. Desperate for fresh air, Tabitha opened the door and stepped onto the porch to inhale the pine-scented mountain breeze.

Her sister trailed after her. "I should've known you wouldn't understand. It's not like you've ever dated much." Planting her hands on her hips, Chloe fired the lethal shot. "You being a freak and all."

The scorn in her voice stung like a swarm of wasps. Tabitha sensed the accusation as half sincere, half chosen because her sister felt how much pain it would cause. Unfortunately, Chloe's mild hint of empathic talent didn't seem to serve any other purpose. It certainly hadn't won Tabitha an ally against their parents, who found her ability embarrassing when they didn't deny it altogether.

"This isn't about me. It's about you disappearing. Mom's worried. She called a few hours ago, before you got here, asking if I'd seen you."

"So now I guess you're going to phone and tell them I'm here?"

"Not yet. Don't know what I'll say when they get desperate and call me again. You're not eighteen yet. They'll drag you back home sooner or later." Tabitha sighed. "I wish you'd go on your own though. A guy who'd expect you to vanish and let the folks think you might've been slaughtered by a serial killer or something can't be worth much."

"Like you know anything about guys. You turned down every boy who wanted to go with you." Chloe's words felt the way petting a porcupine probably would.

"That's not exactly true." Tabitha had accepted a few dates in high school and college. Every time, close contact with the feelings of a casual acquaintance had made her feel like creeping into a burrow and hiding like a rabbit. Especially when those feelings became intense—male sexual desire mingled with worries about how she would respond and whether his performance would live up to his own image of his studliness. "Why don't we calm down and talk about this later, maybe after dinner?" She visualized herself stroking those porcupine quills very carefully, in the right direction to make them lie flat.

Chloe drew back like a cat with ruffled fur. "I don't want to calm down and quit trying to make me."

"What do you mean, make you?" She knew her voice sounded defensive because she'd gotten caught trying to steer her sister's emotions onto a smoother track. Their grandmother had possessed the power to calm people. Tabitha wished she'd inherited more than a trace of that.

"You're sneaking into my mind, the way you used to when we were kids." The only person who really believed in Tabitha's wild talent, Chloe had never gotten straight the difference between emotion-reading and mind-reading.

At this moment, Tabitha felt more glad than usual that she couldn't decipher her sister's exact thoughts. The part she could perceive was bad enough. "Think what you want. I'm tired of fighting. I'm going for a walk."

"Yeah, go on, run away like you always do."

Tabitha stomped down the porch steps, already ashamed of acting like a brat herself. She couldn't stand the hostile emanations any longer though. The atmosphere inside the house felt like a toxic fog that made her stomach churn. The moment she got a few yards away, and Chloe stormed inside and slammed the door, the air felt clearer. Negative emotions still buzzed around her, but the closed door dulled the impact.

She savored the crisp aroma of the pine trees and the lush fragrance of honeysuckles that festooned a nearby fallen tree trunk. Eager to escape the remnants of her sister's anger, she jogged down the gravel driveway to a one-lane road that connected her land with the highway a couple of miles down. She didn't exactly live in the middle of nowhere, the way her family always put it. The ten acres she'd inherited from her grandmother bordered another residential lot, inhabited by a man who seemed as much of a recluse as Tabitha herself. She was thankful that she hardly ever saw him. She preferred loneliness to the stress of armoring herself against random emotions from strangers.

By the time she reached the end of the driveway, she couldn't feel Chloe at all. Birds and animals lurked, easily ignored, in trees and underbrush. Those creatures had refreshingly one-dimensional feelings—hunger, thirst, fear, aggression, lust. With none of it aimed at her, she could treat it as background noise like the breeze rustling the leaves overhead. Human emotions, too complex and too strong, battered her mental walls to splinters. She'd often gotten into trouble by caving in to avoid that assault. Agreeing to let Chloe stay at her place instead of phoning their parents the minute her sister had appeared at the door that day was just the latest instance. She didn't gain much by providing a hideout because she still had to deal with verbal and emotional

whiplashing. She drew the line at letting her sister use her house to hook up with the boyfriend their parents had banned.

When had her relationship with Chloe become such a wreck? When she'd acquired a little sister at age seven, she'd felt protective toward the new baby. Unlike their parents, she could identify the cause of each cry and tell Mom what the baby needed. Though Mom and Dad had never stopped acting leery of Tabitha's ability, they'd accepted her help with translating the baby's demands. For a while, she enjoyed the role of useful child instead of difficult child. "Difficult" was how Mom described Tabitha as an infant and toddler, constantly screaming for reasons her parents couldn't figure out. Now, from an adult perspective, she knew she'd sensed the pain, anxieties and anger of people around her and reacted with panic.

Shaking off the memories of her parents' disapproval, she left the road and veered into the woods, following a narrow trail where she often ran. Her skin grew damp from the late afternoon heat, with her shorts and T-shirt sticking to her. She slowed her pace, pushing up her collar-length hair to let the breeze cool the back of her neck. A feeling, not her own, drifted toward her with the breeze. A glow of admiration she could bask in like sunshine, if only it would stay at that level. That kind of reaction always morphed into something more demanding though.

A split second after she sensed a watcher, she caught sight of a moving figure among the trees ahead. Kenji McGraw, her nearest neighbor, strode in her direction, gliding through the brush so smoothly she couldn't hear his footsteps. She halted about ten feet from him. When his glance met hers, he stopped too. He brushed a stray lock of black hair, growing to just above the nape of his neck with raggedly trimmed bangs in front, off his forehead. She sensed his discomfort in the hot, humid air. Feeling his eyes on her, she realized the T-shirt clinging to her moist flesh outlined the curves of her breasts and the peaks of her nipples. She wore no bra, as usual when she planned to spend the day at home. A blush spread over her face. She waved a greeting to him, and he raised his hand in reply. Though his face showed no more than a faint smile, she felt

heat rising from within him to match the warmth of the summer day. His cheeks reddened too.

He wore less clothing than she did. Besides sneakers, he had on only a pair of satin jogging shorts that clung as tightly as hers. They'd talked only a few times since she'd moved in. After that, she'd occasionally glimpsed him from a distance during her daily run but never this close before. He always detoured in the opposite direction when they stumbled upon each other. Every time, they exchanged casual greetings and headed their separate ways, as if he preferred to avoid people too. That behavior pattern suited her fine.

Now he changed course to retreat into the denser growth. She leaned against a tree and watched him. Only a few inches taller than her own medium height, he had a compact build without a visible ounce of fat. She'd never seen him shirtless before, and she enjoyed the glimpse of muscles flexing under the skin. The shorts outlined a tight rear end, a view that provided a welcome distraction from the fight with her sister. Even if Tabitha's sensitivity to others' emotions kept her from dating, she figured she could still indulge in an occasional fantasy. Good thing he couldn't read her reactions the way she did his.

So why did he radiate embarrassment? Simply because she'd noticed him watching her? She felt something else from him, a wave of arousal that made her skin tingle. The cloth of her shirt abraded her nipples into harder peaks. She hugged herself to press her forearms against them. Kenji's excitement drifted toward her like a spicy-scented mist. Awareness of inciting that desire made her breath catch in her throat like a trapped butterfly. Warm liquid welled between her legs.

By now he'd disappeared from sight behind a misshapen giant of a fallen oak tree festooned with ivy and honeysuckle. He hadn't withdrawn out of sensing range though. She still felt his arousal. If anything, it grew stronger by the minute instead of fading. She knew she ought to turn around and run until she couldn't feel him

anymore. Eavesdropping on emotions he wanted to hide amounted to voyeurism. Besides, why torment herself with the aroma of a banquet she could never taste?

Her body didn't listen. Her throat went dry, with her heart racing and her breath accelerating to keep up. In spite of the breeze, the temperature seemed to rise until she felt as if she stood in front of a roaring campfire. The blaze came from him, no more than twenty feet away. If she charged up to him and touched his naked chest, it would scorch her.

But of course she wouldn't do that. He would think she'd gone crazy. She fell to her knees on the leaf-strewn ground and cupped her breasts with her palms. The ache spread from her nipples across her chest as if a pair of hands larger than her own were splayed over her bare flesh. Her breasts felt heavy, too swollen for the clinging T-shirt. Invisible ants scurried over her skin. She wanted to rip off the shirt and rub herself everywhere at once.

The air thrummed with passion like the beat of music amplified to a deafening level. Not her own passion, but it engulfed her and made her heart pound in cadence with it. She could almost see the waves distorting the world around her, blurring her view of the trees, like a mirage on heated asphalt. Her whole body felt like a single expanding and contracting heartbeat.

She squeezed her breasts, trying to bind her awareness to her own flesh. *They're his feelings, not mine!* But the pulsation only grew more intense by the second. The emptiness between her legs hungered to be filled. A rush of hot wetness made her press her thighs together, trying to quell the gaping need. At the same moment, she felt a hardness that yearned to thrust into that cavity and bury itself in that moist embrace. A rising pressure on the verge of explosion.

I'm feeling his erection! She struggled to block the relentless waves of arousal. Too late. His need swept away her mental shield like a dam of twigs in a flooding river. She couldn't pretend the excitement didn't belong to her as well. She wanted to strip off her pants and plunge her fingers deep into her sheath, as a substitute for the male organ she

never expected to welcome there. Instead, she just cupped her mound through her shorts, pressing hard in rhythm with the accelerating contractions.

A crimson haze veiled the trees around her and the path under her knees. She closed her eyes, but the redness glowed behind her lids. The flesh between her legs started to throb. She felt the pressure reach its peak with a starburst of blinding sparks on the insides of her eyes. Her hips involuntarily jerked with each spurt of hot liquid. Her vagina and clitoris contracted in a dozen short, sharp pulses. In the background, scarcely penetrating her awareness, the keening of some animal ripped through the silence. She bit off a cry, curled into herself and soared with the whirlwind of sensation until it faded.

A languid sigh of relief loosened the tightness in her chest. His relief. Hers too though. Had she screamed aloud in her climax? A flush of embarrassment swept over her. She couldn't deny her ownership of that last feeling. In the back of her mind, she sensed Kenji's presence becoming fainter, drawing away, finally fading completely.

She sat up, hugging her knees to her chest, tears leaking from her eyes. If only she could share that experience, face to face, with a man who cared for her. But she knew she would never get any closer than what had just occurred, a spontaneous merging with a near-stranger. Such a thing had never happened to her before. She'd shied away from men who lusted for her before their arousal could trigger hers beyond control. She would have to make sure it didn't happen again. Worst of all, she couldn't face Kenji again, couldn't even cherish a daydream of friendship.

Chapter Two

When he practically ran into his neighbor jogging through the woods, Kenji indulged a few seconds of fantasy. He could stop and say hello instead of fleeing in the opposite direction. They could carry on a normal conversation, the way he'd sometimes chatted with her grandmother. The old lady had radiated a calming aura. Having her for a neighbor hadn't threatened his peace at all. He'd carved a coffee table out of an oak tree stump for her, and she'd praised his craftsmanship. He wondered whether her granddaughter still used that table. Why didn't he drop by sometime and ask?

Because of the inescapable difference between an elderly widow and a sexy, single woman almost his own age. Because every time he laid eyes on Tabitha, he wanted to lay hands and other appendages on her, and that couldn't happen. He couldn't forget the disasters that had resulted every time he'd tried to get close to a woman. So he allowed himself only a peek at Tabitha's nipples outlined by the damp T-shirt and her legs exposed by the brief, snug shorts before he retreated into the undergrowth.

One peek turned out to be too much, combined with the salty scent of her clean sweat. He couldn't resist inhaling deeply even while he walked away. No perfume, just the tang of her female flesh. The breeze wafted the fragrance toward him, tormenting his senses. He knew his face turned red to match the pinkness of hers. Had she noticed the bulge of the hard-on in his shorts? He definitely had one by the time he got out of sight behind the bulk of the fallen tree.

His keen ears, as well as his nose, told him that she'd stopped instead of moving on down the trail. Why? He sniffed the humid air and smelled female secretions. She felt an attraction too. Their brief meeting had made her wet. His erection grew, tenting his pants. It felt so long and hard he could close his eyes and imagine it jutting out like a steel rod.

Crouching on the ground, he pressed a hand to his aching shaft. No way would he make it home now. Already he could feel the shifting joints and muscles and the prickles under the skin that sexual cravings always triggered. All strong emotions had that effect, but none worse than this kind. She couldn't see him. He'd be safe enough seeking his release right here. In the back of his mind, he knew he'd do it even at risk of her catching him in the act. Her intoxicating scent wouldn't let him crawl out of range. He hungered to savor that aroma while he relieved the pressure it caused. He peeled off his shorts, not wanting to get tangled in them while his excitement ran its course, and shuffled out of his shoes and socks with one hand already massaging his penis. He shouldn't have let so many nights go by without sexual release. His mother had warned him, in an awkward speech when he'd turned twelve, how he would have to feed that craving regularly. She hadn't explained how to take care of the need when he couldn't risk seducing women. He'd figured out the makeshift solution on his own soon enough. By now, he should know better than to let the tension build up this way. If he hadn't, he'd be able to control himself long enough to get to shelter.

Too late now though. His sharp ears picked up the acceleration in Tabitha's breathing. He could tell she tried to suppress it, probably worried about his being close enough to hear. No normal man could have, at this distance, but he had no trouble catching every nuance, every hitch in her throat and rustle of leaves when she rolled on the ground. The tang of her scent confirmed the cause of her restless movements. He was already squirming himself.

He imagined plunging deeply into her, reveling in the union he'd never shared with any woman. He visualized what he could never know in reality, soft arms around his neck, lips parted under his, smooth legs clamped around his hips. For a second he flushed with self-contempt at the memory of the only way he had experienced mating, but need quickly drowned shame. He rubbed his cock harder and faster, his breathing labored as the pressure intensified beyond bearing. He imagined her slick sheath clenched around him.

A spasm of ecstasy on the edge of pain contorted his body. His joints cracked as his limbs shrank, bent and realigned. A crawling sensation coursed over his bare skin. His nose elongated while his ears grew pointed, fangs sprouted in his jaws, and a new appendage erupted from the base of his spine. The world fractured around him then reshaped itself in his altered vision. The light breeze carrying the woman's musk to him tickled his whiskers. Panting, he tasted the air. All scents instantly became more pungent, so vivid he could almost see them shimmering in the humid atmosphere, making up for the sudden change in his vision that attenuated colors to pastels and grays. His nostrils flared to inhale the smells of moist loam, pine needles, small animals scurrying through the underbrush, and above all the humid flesh of the female a short distance away. He could almost feel her pussy squeezing his eager cock.

He no longer had hands to pump his erect organ. Instead, he dug the claws of all four feet into the soil and sprawled on his belly to thrust through the final convulsions. A high-pitched howl burst from his throat at the same instant that he shot his juices into the leaf-mold.

He lay on his side, panting, until his heartbeat slowed to normal. He picked himself up and slunk homeward, leaving his clothes on the ground to collect later. If he could have shed tears in his nonhuman form, they would have leaked from his eyes now. In this shape, he only dimly recalled the cause of his despair, but the inarticulate state of his thoughts made them no less painful.

* * * * *

The near-miss encounter only confirmed Tabitha's usual practice of staying out of Kenji's way. Not that she disliked what little she knew of him. He earned his living by custom woodworking, and last fall she'd commissioned him to make a set of monkeypod salad bowls as a Christmas gift for her parents. In casual conversation, she'd found out his father had been an officer in the Navy who'd married a Japanese woman. Both were dead, and Kenji had lived alone on the mountainside for several years longer than Tabitha had owned her place. During her two visits to his house, first

to discuss the job and later to pick up the finished product, she'd felt that warm glow from him. It had disturbed her less than similar reactions from her few dating partners. Kenji had seemed embarrassed about noticing her figure, eager to withdraw from contact rather than determined to foist his attention on her like most men. She remembered how he'd practically pushed her out the door with her purchase the second time she'd dropped by his place. He seemed as reluctant to associate with people as she was.

On the way home, she couldn't help comparing what she'd just experienced to her few dates in high school and college. Suppose she did work up the nerve to pursue a relationship with her neighbor instead of avoiding him? If that kind of passion overwhelmed them when they met face to face, would she react any less disastrously than she had with other men? She remembered writhing in silent embarrassment in the passenger seat of a boy's car after leaving a movie one Friday night. The movie itself had shielded her from the full force of his desire, which skulked around the edges of her mind like a coyote stalking a flock of sheep. In the car, with no distractions, she had to keep pushing away his lust like a hairy, clumsy dog jumping on her. And he hadn't even touched her since they'd left their seats in the theater. She remembered how she'd tensed up when he'd parked the car under a tree on a dark side street outside a vacant house. His lust had felt greedy, a hunger she couldn't possibly sate. It crept under her skin and made her body tingle in response, but she knew that need belonged to him, not her. She hadn't even found him that attractive. As a casual friend and president of the chess club rather than a class leader or star athlete, he'd impressed her as somebody she could date without feeling threatened. The feelings that lurked behind his bland exterior knocked her off balance. His craving for her flesh had smothered her, even though he'd ventured no more than a lopsided, wet kiss. At that point, she'd insisted on going home.

He hadn't asked her out again. Most of her attempts at dating followed the same pattern. She'd expected more complex reactions from her college classmates, but it turned out men that age just had more skill at masking the outward signs of their

appetites. Whenever she took the risk of spending time with a man who actually appealed to her physically, uncertainty over whether the desire she felt was truly hers or a byproduct of his spoiled her pleasure in kisses and caresses. By the time she had enough experience to distinguish her feelings from those of the person touching her, she'd become too skittish for anything resembling intimacy. Over the years she'd grown more sensitive to others' emotions rather than less. Now she'd reached the point where even her infrequent trips into town for groceries strained her control. Often her only human contact for weeks consisted of an occasional greeting from the mailman, whose mind usually emitted nothing more stressful than discomfort from rain, cold or heat.

In front of the house, she paused to extend mental antennae and sample the vibrations inside. The uproar she'd fled from had died down. She slumped onto the sagging porch steps and sat there for a minute, letting the evening breeze cool her flushed cheeks. The house's comfortably shabby facade, with brown boards weathered almost to gray, usually made her feel safe. Having started life as her grandparents' vacation home, it retained a rustic cabin look despite the winterizing and modern appliances added in later years. Grandmama's serene aura still seemed to cling to the worn rugs and faded wallpaper. Tabitha resented having her refuge tainted by the family turmoil she'd retreated here to escape.

With a sigh, she stood up and braced herself to face her sister. When she went inside, she found Chloe at the computer in a corner of the living room. From the doorway, Tabitha could see the Internet in use but of course couldn't read anything on the screen. Chloe glanced at her with a muttered "hi", hastily sent the e-mail she'd just written and closed the browser. "Checking my mail. Hope that's cool with you?" Though she obviously tried to keep her tone casual, her mind felt jagged with nervousness.

"Sure, that's fine. Sorry I bailed like that." Tabitha knew she would get nowhere asking what Chloe was hiding. Challenging her evasiveness would only start another fight. "It's getting late. I'll throw a couple of burgers on."

She laid a grill pan over a pair of burners on the gas stove in the kitchen while Chloe set the table in the dining alcove with a picture-window view of the woods. Neither of them spoke, which Tabitha thought was just as well. She'd always been able to tell when Chloe was lying, just as she had with other people. Dissonance between words and intentions had made her skull jangle like an out-of-tune bell ever since she'd learned to talk. She mentally winced at the memory of blurting out to a middle-aged single friend of her mother's, crooning about how much she loved little girls, "No, you don't, kids make you feel creepy." In first grade she'd contradicted her teacher's declaration to an unruly class, "Now, I don't want to have to take away your playtime today," with "That's not true. You like punishing us". Instead of praise for honesty, she'd received a harsh scolding for rudeness.

By the time of Chloe's birth, Tabitha had started learning to curb her tongue around less-than-frank adults. When her baby sister had grown old enough to lie, though, Tabitha took it for granted that their parents would want the truth about who'd accidentally knocked over a vase or let the cat escape out the back door. They didn't, not after the first few incidents. She got sent to her room with reminders that nobody liked a tattletale. A few years into elementary school, she learned to keep her mouth shut except when directly addressed, a habit that earned her a reputation for shyness. She didn't dare talk much for fear the wrong words would tumble out. On the plus side, burying herself in books had turned her into a straight-A student. After a couple of years of office work following college, she'd networked into freelance copyediting and technical writing jobs she could do online, from home. Inheriting this secluded house had formed the final step in her plan to construct a life where she never had to encounter people unless she wanted to.

So, yeah, Chloe had a point in accusing her of running away from things. Who could blame her, Tabitha thought, considering what happened when she did associate with family members, such as now? Although the two of them didn't raise their voices or make any hostile remarks, the atmosphere continued to twang with tension through dinner, dishwashing and an hour in front of the TV watching sitcoms on satellite

channels. Tabitha, relieved when Chloe withdrew to her bedroom at nine, retreated to her own room to distract herself with a new mystery novel. She made sure to stow her purse, with car keys zipped inside it, in her closet. If she had to take temporary responsibility for her sister, reasonable precautions against impulsive acts such as “borrowing” her car made sense. That way, her parents couldn’t accuse her of letting Chloe run wild during the visit that, with luck, would be brief.

* * * * *

She woke to darkness and silence, except for crickets chirping outside the open window. The fragments of a dream shredded and drifted away, a luscious dream of rolling in Kenji’s arms on the cool, pine-needle-carpeted forest floor. Her nipples and clit tingled. She pressed a hand against the wetness between her legs and waited for her heartbeat to stop pounding in her head. Within seconds, her breathing slowed to normal. For a minute she strained her ears, wondering what had shattered her sleep. Nothing. When she woke to full consciousness, she realized she sensed a vacuum where a hazy cloud of muted emotions should emanate from Chloe’s dreaming mind. Tabitha glanced at the luminous digits of the clock on the nightstand. Five minutes past midnight.

She got out of bed, her skin prickling with the coolness that nightfall brought to the mountains, even in mid-June. Without stopping to throw on anything warm over her flimsy nightgown, she tiptoed into the hall. Maybe her perceptions had failed her for once, and Chloe hadn’t really left the house. She turned the doorknob of the other bedroom inch by inch until she could ease the door open. One glance showed her that the sheets were flung back and the bed was empty. A quick check of the bathroom confirmed her sister’s absence.

Don’t tell me she went for a walk in the woods in the middle of the night! I can’t imagine her stumbling around under the trees in the dark.

Unless she’d gone only as far as the driveway, for a little fresh air. Tabitha had trouble visualizing even that much of a midnight foray, considering Chloe’s pose of big-

city boredom with nature in the almost-raw. Another thought sent her to the kitchen, where she found one of her two flashlights missing. So Chloe had expected to need light, a bit of preparation that indicated she'd planned her expedition. Tabitha flicked on the floodlight over the back deck, slipped her feet into the flip-flops she kept by the kitchen door and hurried outside. No sign of her sister behind the house. A circuit of the yard brought no results. Chloe had definitely sneaked away.

If she'd simply wanted to leave, she'd have waited until daylight and said so, probably asking for a ride to town. So she must have a reason for secrecy. Remembering Chloe's nervous behavior at the computer, Tabitha went into the living room and booted it up. She knew her sister's screen name, of course. She typed "ScarletWings" into the box. As for the password, when Tabitha had lived at home, Chloe had used the same three passwords for all Internet activities and not bothered to hide them from the rest of the family. With luck, she'd remained predictable that way.

She had. The second letter combination Tabitha tried, RavenX, accessed the account. Without the least twinge of guilt, she opened the in-box and clicked on the most recent message, dated that afternoon. Somebody labeled ShadowElf wanted to know where Chloe was and when they could meet. Tabitha switched over to the "sent mail" folder and quickly found the reply: "I'll be on Route 29 where my sister's road joins it about 12:30 tonight. Wait for me if I don't get there right on time 'cause I'll probably have to walk." The e-mail then described the landmarks that identified the crossroads of Route 29 with the narrow lane meandering up to the house.

Fuming, Tabitha logged off. It didn't take much of a leap to figure out "ShadowElf" was the forbidden boyfriend. So much for trusting Chloe not to get herself and Tabitha into deep trouble with the folks. On the other hand, if Chloe intended to run away permanently, she wouldn't have to face the trouble. She'd have left it all for other people to clean up.

Especially me, Tabitha grumbled to herself. It occurred to her that she still had time to head off this rendezvous. Without access to the car keys, Chloe had to reach the

highway on foot. Catching up with her before she met the boy shouldn't pose a problem. Tabitha scrambled into jeans, a T-shirt, tennis shoes and a lightweight denim jacket and tied her hair out of the way in a lopsided ponytail. Grabbing her purse and the flashlight, she dashed to the car, backed out of the driveway and headed down the hillside. She gritted her teeth, fighting anger that for once she recognized as entirely her own, and debated whether to phone their parents to collect Chloe before or after shoving the brat into a bedroom and barricading the door.

Chapter Three

The winding, one-lane road had no street lamps. Tabitha had to drive slowly, scanning the shoulders by the headlight beams alone. Unless Chloe glimpsed the lights around a curve and hid in the bushes, though, she'd be impossible to miss. With the windows down and her mind wide open, Tabitha would sense the girl even if she didn't see her right away.

But she felt only the fuzzy consciousness of night birds and small animals she couldn't identify. No hint of movement, aside from shadows thrown by her headlights, broke the stillness of the road. She drove to the Route 29 intersection at a crawl, much slower than she usually covered the distance. Surely Chloe couldn't have beaten her to the spot. No, not even at a run.

At the bottom of the lane, Tabitha parked the car under the trees and got out, locking the doors. With her purse slung over her shoulder and the unlit flashlight in one hand, she crept toward the highway, though her sixth sense told her nobody waited there. The night remained silent except for the chirping of crickets. A lamppost across the road cast a circle of light whose outer edge she avoided. She lurked behind a huge, double-trunked oak tree looming next to the wooden sign that was supposed to mark the turn-off toward her house. Years of weather had worn the words "Honeysuckle Way" to illegibility. With only two properties on that road, hers and Kenji McGraw's, the loss didn't matter. Anybody who'd visit here would get directions from one or the other of them.

She leaned against the tree, watching fireflies and checking the time every few minutes. Chloe must have tried a shortcut through the woods. Dumb thing to do, but her behavior hadn't demonstrated much wisdom so far. Still, if she kept going downhill, she had to end up at the highway eventually. Tabitha nibbled on a fingernail

and tried not to worry. If her sister got hurt wandering around the mountains at night, their parents would skin both of them alive. With a nervous laugh, Tabitha reminded herself how tame this “wilderness” was, even with the Shenandoah National Park a few miles away. Bears weren’t common enough to constitute a realistic threat. Lesser predators avoided people. *What do I think could happen to her, she’ll get gored by a deer?*

Or maybe she might stumble over a skittish skunk, a fate that would serve her right, except that Tabitha would have to live with the fallout too. She sighed and rubbed her eyes, longing for her bed and the interrupted dream. Before her thoughts could drift too far in that fruitless direction, a car engine broke the silence. She peeked around the tree.

Some kind of sports car roared to a stop, a two-seater with a motor too loud for its size. The driver turned off the ignition, stepped out and lounged against the hood. A boy in his late teens with silver-tipped black hair, he wore dark pants and a T-shirt, cut off to expose his abs, with a logo of an unidentifiable fanged monster on it. She read nervousness and impatience in the glances he darted from side to side. He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and struck a match.

No sense dragging out an unpleasant scene. Tabitha strolled around the tree and said, “ShadowElf, I presume?” She couldn’t help gloating a little when he jumped and dropped the match on the pavement. A spike of alarm shot from his mind.

When he saw only a woman, he calmed down. “Sorry, I’m waiting for somebody else.” He fumbled the matchbook open again.

“Don’t bother to light up. You won’t be here long enough.” She folded her arms and glared at him.

He frowned back at her. He didn’t need to speak for Tabitha to sense his resentment at her giving him orders.

“I know you’re supposed to meet Chloe. She’s not coming.” She saw no need to mention that she had no idea where Chloe was at this moment. Let the guy think he’d been stood up.

"You've got to be her sister. The weirdo who reads minds. What did you do to her?"

Tabitha ignored the tiny stab of hurt caused by those words. By now she should be used to that kind of reaction. "Not a thing. But she isn't going anywhere with you. You might as well split."

"You've got no right to tell us what to do. I'm not leaving without her." His simmering resentment heated toward anger.

"Then you'll have a long wait." The cloud of negative emotion emanating from him started to seep into her head and fill it with a dull ache.

"Where is she? Did you lock her up or something? How do I know she's okay?" He took one stride toward Tabitha.

She fought the impulse to back away. "No, I didn't lock her up. What makes you think she didn't just change her mind?"

"She wouldn't. We love each other." In the light from the street lamp, a blush showed on his face. Anxiety tinged his anger, along with embarrassment at making that claim out loud. "Come on, give us a break. Why are you siding with your folks? You're not that old yet."

A flush of annoyance swamped her momentary sympathy for him. "Old enough to want to stop her from acting like an idiot. Love, huh? What did you plan to do, run off and get married?"

"Yeah, why not?" Defiance mingled with guilt seasoned the words.

"That's crap. For one thing, you know she's not old enough."

Though he gave no outward sign, she felt him flinch at the direct hit. "She'll be eighteen in a few months. Then we can—"

"You're lying. You never thought of it until a minute ago."

Now he was the one who backed up. "Hell, Chloe was right. You're reading my mind."

"Then you don't deny it?" She crowded him against the car, brandishing the flashlight like a weapon. "You've been stringing her along, just playing her, right?"

"No way!" His hand clamped onto the driver's side door handle.

"Then what do you feel so guilty about?"

"Get out of my head!" His fear and anger hit her like a fist to the jaw. He flung open the car door, jumped inside, slammed the door, switched on the ignition, made a wide U-turn and accelerated up the highway.

Tabitha staggered into the shelter of the trees and leaned against the huge oak. She trembled with relief at the fading of the boy's turbulent emotions. Slowly, her breathing settled to normal. She'd disposed of the immediate problem. Now she just had to find her sister. Why hadn't Chloe shown up yet? With a flashlight and the slope of the ground to guide her, how lost could she get? Tabitha dredged a heavy sigh from deep in her chest. *Idiot, what possessed her to leave the road in the first place? Probably expecting me to follow her, just like I did. Now I'll bet she's roaming around in circles somewhere up there.*

Tabitha knew she'd get nowhere striking out aimlessly through the underbrush herself. Maybe if she hiked up the road toward the house, periodically venturing a few yards into the woods and calling her sister's name, she'd get lucky. Even if Chloe refused to answer verbally, she couldn't hide her emotional reaction. Muttering curses under her breath, Tabitha turned on the flashlight and started walking.

Fifteen minutes of trudging uphill, with detours into the trees to yell herself hoarse, produced nothing except a dry throat and sore leg muscles. At least now she didn't have to worry about getting chilled by the night air. She was beginning to sweat in her lightweight jacket. She would have been falling asleep on her feet too if she weren't too exasperated to feel drowsy. When she finally caught up with Chloe, her pain-in-the-butt sister would pay for this.

At the bottom of her neighbor's driveway, Tabitha switched off the flashlight and paused to rest by the mailbox. Maybe she wasted time and energy searching by herself. Suppose she asked Kenji for help? He'd lived here longer than she had and probably

knew the trails through the woods a lot better. In any case, two searchers could cover ground more efficiently than one. What the heck, the worst he could do was say no and yell at her for waking him up. Which she couldn't imagine from such a sweet-looking guy. Sure, he'd practically thrown her off his front porch when she'd picked up the salad bowl set, but he'd done it quietly.

When she reached the top of the driveway and stood in front of the house, she considered how dumb she would look if Chloe had come to her senses and simply gone home to bed. *I've gone this far, Tabitha thought, no point in turning back now.*

An A-frame with wood siding stained a rich reddish-brown, his home looked less rustic than hers. He kept the shrubbery around his porch trimmed, something she didn't bother with. She paused on the bottom step and turned off the flashlight, swallowing a lump of nervousness. Was he asleep or awake? A mental probe through the walls yielded no sense of a presence at all, though a car sat in the driveway. Had he gone for a walk at this strange hour? Well, at least three other people were out and about, including herself. She smiled ruefully at the thought of the anticlimax if she worked up the nerve to knock at Kenji's door and he wasn't even home.

Then another mind brushed hers, but not from inside the house. She felt some live creature moving under the trees not far away. It didn't feel human. She froze, not wanting to scare away whatever it was. The feral consciousness she touched radiated pleasant weariness and the satisfaction of a full stomach. It glided toward the deck at the rear of the cabin. Holding her breath, she watched a shape emerge from the undergrowth and pace into the clearing behind the house. It didn't seem to notice her. Maybe the breeze blew the wrong way to carry her scent. She glimpsed the glow of the animal's eyes for a second. With her vision adjusting to the moonlight, she could distinguish its outline. It had the plumed tail and pointed muzzle of a fox, but it looked bigger than any fox she'd ever seen, the size of a small collie. Before she could get a better look, it disappeared around back.

Too worried about her sister to wonder about the animal for long, she knocked on the door. As she'd feared, she got no answer. Yet a few seconds later a sense of Kenji's nearness blossomed out of nowhere. He was inside the house after all. Why hadn't she felt him before? He hadn't simply awakened from sleep. She knew what that shift in awareness felt like. If he'd just come back from a midnight stroll, she would have sensed him from farther away, and she would certainly have seen or at least heard him walking up to the house. She could only guess that the clash with the boy had rattled her enough to dull her empathic perception temporarily.

Now she read Kenji's emotions as strongly as ever. When she repeated the knock, a haze of drowsy satiation morphed into mild annoyance. So he didn't want to be bothered. Too bad. She felt him moving through the house in her direction, though she didn't hear footsteps until he got almost to the door. When it opened, his irritation changed to surprise at the sight of her.

His black hair, tousled as if he'd just gotten out of bed after all, gleamed in the overhead light. His bare feet accounted for her not having heard him walking on the polished hardwood floors. Most of the rest of him was bare too. Just as he had earlier that evening, he wore only a clingy pair of navy blue shorts. Dragging her eyes away from the shape those pants outlined, she moved to the safer territory of his face. Or maybe not so safe, because she'd never studied his brown eyes so closely before, and she discovered fascinating flecks of gold in the irises. A faintly Asian slant to his features gave him an exotic charm she hadn't taken time to appreciate during their previous meetings. Those enchanting eyes looked at her without much sign of friendliness, yet he projected a conflicting push-pull of impulses. He wanted her gone instantly, but an aura of arousal surrounded him like steam from boiling water. She started to simmer too, feeling the excitement her eyes had already noted in their travels over his body.

When his face reddened, she felt hers doing the same. Was he thinking of their chance encounter in the woods? He couldn't read her mind or emotions, as far as she

knew, so why did she blush deeper at that assumption? It didn't help that she stared at him with her lips parted, trying to catch her breath instead of stating the request she'd come to make. His mouth opened and his breath became rapid and shallow too, as if her nervousness were contagious.

Finally, he broke the silence with, "What do you want?"

She tensed at the way this unpromising welcome rasped on her nerves. "Sorry to bother you, but my sister's missing, and I'm worried. I'm hoping you can help."

"How?" He sounded only a shade less annoyed. Meanwhile, he scanned her in a way that made her acutely conscious of her braless condition. Fortunately, the jacket covered her pebbled-up nipples. Or unfortunately, depending on whether she wanted to feel more of that leashed excitement from him.

She shook her head, forcing herself to think of Chloe, lost in the dark somewhere on the hillside between here and the road. Regardless of how tame these woods were, people still got hurt in them every year. Worrying about her sister provided a barricade against the tendrils of arousal emanating from Kenji and swirling around her. "Can I come in and explain?"

"Okay." His grudging tone echoed the reluctance in his thoughts. Stepping aside, he made room for her to enter. The fragrance of wood shavings that drifted from his workroom tickled her nose. The front door opened into a living room no bigger than her own, furnished with a long, low couch, a low table of shiny black wood, surrounded by plump cushions scattered on the floor, an entertainment center on the opposite wall featuring every sound and video component a stereotypically tech-obsessed guy could dream of and a bonsai tree on a stand in a corner. The slanted walls drew the eye to the exposed ceiling beams. "What's up?" he asked, plopping down on one of the cushions. His trimly muscled legs crossed in a graceful half-lotus.

Her eyes couldn't help flicking to the front of his shorts. From the deepening of the flush on his cheeks, he thought of the accidental word-play the same instant she did. She squashed the thought, hoping her own blush would fade if she ignored it. Since

sharing the floor with him would feel too intimate after that remark, she sat on the couch.

Oh, no, I hope he doesn't think I'm making an excuse to drop in and hit on him. She swallowed her nervousness and said, "Chloe ran away from home, sort of, because she had a fight with our folks over a boy. A little while ago she sneaked out to meet him. I read her e-mail..."

Kenji interrupted with a teasing smile that made the invisible hedge of thorns bristling around him vanish. "You read your sister's e-mail? Isn't that against the sibling code of honor?"

"Normally, yeah, but I was desperate. If Mom and Dad knew she got into trouble while I was supposedly responsible for her, they'd kill me. Even if I didn't invite her here in the first place. Anyway, I headed off the guy and got him to leave, but Chloe never showed. I think she took a shortcut through the woods and got lost."

He leaned back on his elbows, looking at her upside down. "What makes you think I can find her any better than you can?" A tinge of suspicion colored the question.

Suspicion of what? Tabitha felt as if he were hiding something that he feared she might discover, but she couldn't imagine what. She pushed the idea away, deciding her worry and confusion made her perceive layers of meaning that didn't exist. "I just thought two of us would have a better chance. Also, I figure you know the area better. You've lived here longer."

"True." He stared into space for a minute, a blend of unidentifiable emotions churning in his head. It felt like a ball of yarn with so many strands that the only threads she could untangle were a hunger to draw her close and a fear that something terrible would happen if he surrendered to the desire. "Okay."

She jumped at the abrupt reply. "Great, thanks. Let's get going."

"Not you, just me." He unfolded his legs and stood up in a single, fluid motion.

She sprang to her feet. "What?"

"I'm going alone. I know where to look, and you'd only slow me down, maybe scare her away if she's trying to avoid you. You wait here."

"No way! That's my sister we're talking about." His argument sounded too flimsy to be worth refuting, and besides, she heard the unmistakable taint of a half-lie in his voice.

Already halfway to the door, he turned toward her. "That's the deal. If you want my help, you let me do it my way."

Chapter Four

"Where do you get off issuing orders? Of course I'm going."

"If you did, the whole thing would be a waste of time. We wouldn't find her." He meant that, she could tell. He had access to a search method he was sure would work. But that wasn't the whole truth.

"What's your real reason for not wanting me along?"

He blinked in surprise. She felt him flinch the way people always did when she probed their motives. As usual, any chance of simple friendship was already sliding downhill. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said with an overly casual shrug. "If you don't need help after all, let me go back to sleep." She sensed that he did want to help her, whether from sheer altruism or from a desire to know her better, she couldn't tell. His determination to search alone, though, grew more unmistakable by the second.

"Oh, all right, have it your way. I'm not getting anywhere on my own, that's for sure." Realizing how ungracious she sounded, she forced a smile and added, "Thanks. Sorry to make such a hassle out of it."

"No problem." He opened the door and said, "You stay here. From the way you sound running on the trails, she'd hear you coming a mile away." He grinned to soften the insult. "This shouldn't take long. Don't worry."

Before she could construct a snappy retort, he hurried into the back room, to reappear a minute later in tennis shoes and a T-shirt. Without another word, he disappeared out the front door. She realized he'd left without so much as a flashlight. Did he have eyes like a cat or what? Well, maybe he kept a flashlight on the porch or in his car.

By the time she opened the door and followed him outside, he was nowhere in sight.

* * * * *

As soon as he reached the shelter of the trees, Kenji stripped naked and prepared to search. He would have to backtrack toward Tabitha's house in hope of crossing the girl's trail. Since Tabitha's and Chloe's should be the only human female scents in the area, finding the spoor shouldn't pose a problem.

Tucking his clothes into the fork of a branch for safekeeping, he wondered what had possessed him to agree to this quest. He couldn't fool himself that he'd just wanted to do the neighborly thing. He liked Tabitha and didn't want to see her worried and scared. He lusted after her and wanted to make a good impression, regardless of the impossibility of a relationship. Neither of those impulses justified putting himself in the risky position of having to explain how he could find a teenage girl in the woods in the middle of the night. He groaned to himself at the memory of the lame excuse he'd given Tabitha for making her stay behind. With luck, she'd feel so relieved to have her sister safe that she wouldn't think to ask for details right away, and he wouldn't give her a chance to ask later. They wouldn't see each other again except for their usual chance meetings on the trails.

Why did that prospect depress him so much? Until tonight, he'd thought he'd become resigned to his solitary life.

Naked, he crouched on all fours and willed the change.

He transformed more smoothly than when strong emotion made him shift involuntarily. Now his bones and muscles melted into their new shape with a sensuous pleasure like hot water flowing over his bare limbs. The fur that enveloped him felt more natural than skin, as if he'd awakened from a dream of bipedal awkwardness and returned to his true self, with the claws of all four feet denting the soft loam. Darkness became shades of gray and silver in the moonlight. When human, he could see in the

dark better than normal people, but nothing like this. His whiskers twitched at random puffs of wind, and his nostrils flared to absorb the odors of the forest. Rabbits, squirrels and raccoons crouched or crawled in the underbrush and tree branches. Ordinarily, he might hunt one of them for the sport even though he'd already fed on a rabbit earlier that night. Now, though, he had a job to do.

He shook his head, aware of how quickly his human purpose had escaped his mind. Getting distracted by animal sensations and appetites was always a hazard when he changed. Normally it wouldn't matter if he let instinct sweep thought into the background. But he couldn't succumb to that temptation at the moment.

He trotted uphill in the direction of Tabitha's house. His ears twitched at every sound. He heard no human noises, only an owl hooting overhead and small animals scurrying out of his path. Along the way, he disturbed a doe with a pair of fawns, who bounded through the trees to avoid him. He scented the footprints of a bear, left over from at least a day ago, nothing to worry about now. At the bottom of his neighbor's driveway, he circled, sniffing the ground, in search of human traces. His plumed tail lashed with pleasure at Tabitha's aroma, permeating the area. He forced his mind back to the reason he'd come here. Casting a little farther from the house, he picked up the scent of another female. With a low bark of satisfaction, he followed the track downhill.

In the daytime even human eyes could probably have tracked the girl. She'd left footprints in the damp soil and broken twigs on bushes. Shortly, she'd stumbled onto one of the narrow trails and followed that in the general direction of the road. For most of its length, this trail stayed on level or gently sloping ground. Farther on, though, it bordered a steep bank on one side. That was where he heard labored breathing from human lungs. A broken thorn-bush and scuffed dirt showed where the girl had tripped and failed to catch herself. The breeze carried the scent of blood.

He edged around the spot until he reached an easier point to climb down into the ravine. He conjured a ball of foxfire to augment his night vision in the shadowed hollow. The girl lay on her back with her left shin bleeding. A flashlight, still glowing,

had rolled out of her reach. An occasional whimper punctuated her rasping breaths. She didn't catch sight of him until he'd approached close enough to touch. With a shriek, she snatched up a small rock and flung it at him. It bounced off his flank.

He growled at the sting and dodged the next stone. He couldn't do anything for her in this shape. Extinguishing the foxfire, he clambered up the bank and trotted along the trail to its juncture with one that led near his house. Able to make good time on the cleared surfaces, he reached the place where he'd left his clothes within a few minutes. After dressing, he hurried back to the spot where Chloe had fallen. Cutting through the brush and climbing down the bank to reach the girl gave him a few scratches on his arms and legs, but no discomfort he couldn't ignore.

He picked up the flashlight when he reached the bottom, more to let her get a look at him than because he needed it himself. "Chloe?"

"What? Who's there?" She unthinkingly rolled toward him and yelped in obvious pain.

"Take it easy and don't move. Tabitha sent me to look for you. I'm her neighbor, Kenji McGraw."

"How'd you find me?"

"Luck, I guess," he said, hoping to sound convincingly casual. "I figured you'd stick to the trails, so it was just a matter of checking them until I came across the spot where you fell."

"In the dark?" She tried to sit up and lay back with a hiss through clenched teeth. "I think my leg's broken."

He trained the flashlight beam on her left calf. The blood oozed from superficial scratches. No bone pierced the skin. "Good thing it's not a compound fracture. If that's the only serious injury, I think the best idea would be for me to carry you back to my place. Then we'll call for help." It crossed his mind that if he'd been thinking like a normal man, he would have brought a cell phone, and the paramedics could meet them at the house. On the other hand, how could a fox carry a phone?

He smiled at the thought of rigging a collar to support necessary items like that. Not that he expected another emergency of this kind to pop up anytime soon. Of course, if it did, he could plan ahead next time and stash a phone with his clothes.

"Wait here a second. I don't want to pick you up until we get that immobilized." A rapid survey of the surrounding trees revealed a straight limb of suitable length a few yards away. He trotted over to it, snapped off a two-foot section and cleared it of twigs and leaves. With his T-shirt as a bandage, he strapped the stick snugly to the broken leg. From a long-ago Red Cross course, he knew a bulky item of clothing would make a better splint, but he didn't want to leave Chloe again to get one.

"Let's go." He sank to one knee and put an arm under her back. "Can you hold onto my neck? I'll try not to hurt you too much."

* * * * *

Tabitha alternately sat on Kenji's front steps and paced up and down the driveway for what seemed like hours. As much as she itched to charge into the woods after him, she knew blundering around out there would do no good. She'd be lucky not to get lost or hurt herself. As fast and quietly as he seemed able to move, she didn't have a hope of catching up with him. And though she hated to admit his orders made sense, it was true that two people together couldn't search any better than one alone who knew where to look.

How did he know? He'd sounded more confident than he had any right to. From the way he'd acted so far, she didn't expect to get a straight answer out of him on that point.

She'd cycled back to the step-sitting phase of her vigil when she spotted a light floating up the driveway. She jumped up. Kenji strode into the circle of light from the porch lamp with a flashlight in one hand and Chloe in his arms. He'd taken off his shirt, now tied around her leg. A fog of pain hovered around them.

"Oh, thank God, you really found her." Tabitha dashed to his side.

"Yeah, I said I would, didn't I? Let's get her inside and call 911."

"What's wrong with her?" She flung the front door open and looked around for a phone.

"Kitchen," Kenji said, gesturing with the flashlight.

Tabitha sprinted through the door he'd indicated, saw the phone on the wall next to the refrigerator and made the call. Back in the living room, she found her sister lying on the couch. Sweat plastered Chloe's hair to her scalp, and tears stained her cheeks. She emitted shame and frustration underneath the drumbeat of the pain.

"What happened?" Tabitha said.

"I tripped and fell, like a total dork. Broke my leg, I think."

"I just hope I didn't make it worse carrying her here. It seemed like the right thing to do." His concern felt genuine. Tabitha let it wrap around her like a well-worn blanket.

She bit back the impulse to yell at Chloe for acting like an idiot. Starting a fight would add emotional distress to the physical pain she could barely fend off by itself. That dull throb got worse minute by minute. Thirst and exhaustion lurked somewhere in there too. "Kenji, do you think she could have some water?" She thought about asking him for aspirin, but suppose Chloe had a concussion? They'd better wait for the professionals to decide about drugs.

He went into the kitchen and came back with a glass of ice water and a handful of damp paper towels. Tabitha accepted them, blotted her sister's forehead and swabbed the blood and dirt off her leg while Kenji supported Chloe in a half-reclining position to drink. Under the improvised splint, her calf already showed bruises and swelling. "Did you get hurt anywhere else?" Tabitha asked.

Chloe shook her head. "Just bumps and scrapes." She grimaced. "You probably guessed where I went."

"To meet the boyfriend, right?" Tabitha didn't think it would be a good idea to mention reading her sister's e-mail.

"Now he'll think I bailed on him." A stab of emotional pain echoed the physical one.

While Tabitha debated whether to admit she'd intercepted the boy and chased him off, sirens wailed up the driveway. Kenji let in the paramedics, both men, one young and wiry, the other middle-aged and burly. She stood off to the side while they unfolded a gurney and prepared Chloe for transport. Every movement shot another dart of pain into the leg and into Tabitha's head.

Fear sharpened Chloe's anguish. "Mom and Dad will kill me. Tabby, do you have to tell them?"

"Did your brain get damaged too? You know I have to. For one thing, how else is your hospital bill supposed to get paid?"

Chloe shut her eyes, fresh tears leaking from them. Her distress pulled Tabitha down like quicksand. She caught herself clutching Kenji's hand as if it could haul her out of that pit. Bracing herself, she watched the paramedics hook up an IV and wheel her sister to the ambulance. The husky one told her their destination, the small community hospital in the nearest town, and reassured her that Chloe seemed to have a fractured tibia. Nothing life threatening.

When the cloud of pain vanished into the distance with the siren, Tabitha shuddered in relief. She realized she still gripped Kenji's hand and let go of it, dimly aware that she'd unconsciously dug her nails into it. He didn't step away from her, as she expected. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her. Trembling, she leaned on his slim, firm body. She found his shoulder just the proper height for resting her head.

"Shh, it's okay. They said she'll be fine." He radiated caring and comfort that nobody had offered her since her grandmother's death. When was the last time anyone had held her this way? Her parents, when she visited at Christmas, gave her awkward

hugs, with contact only at shoulders and cheeks, as if they didn't want to risk touching their mind-probing daughter more than necessary.

Tabitha realized she was still shaking. She didn't want to let go of him. Her knees might collapse under her. "How did you find her that fast?"

"Just lucky." The full truth hid in a corner of his mind like a mouse in its burrow. She didn't challenge his evasion, since she couldn't explain how she knew he was withholding information. "You want to go to the hospital now, right?" he said. "Should I drive you to your place to pick up some of your sister's clothes and stuff?"

"Thanks." She raised her head and wiped her eyes. "Then could you run me to the crossroads to get my car?"

"Are you kidding? You can't drive when you're upset like this. I'm taking you to the hospital."

"You don't have to do that, not after I dragged you out in the middle of the night."

"I want to." The sincerity behind the words enveloped her like a thermal blanket on a chilly evening. He didn't make any move to release her and lead the way to his car though. His brown eyes softened with warmth she couldn't bring herself to turn away from. His embrace tightened and his hand massaged her back in slow circles. She sensed hunger in him, lurking under the impulse to help. With her breasts flattened against his chest, her hips fitted to his, she felt a swelling hardness between his legs. Their heights matched so well that the apex of her thighs cradled his erection.

Embarrassment, his and her own combined, surrounded them as hot as the vapor from a steam bath. She knew she ought to pull back. His mind projected the same feeling. But neither of them made a move because the other emotion, the need, overwhelmed good judgment. She couldn't help thinking of their earlier meeting. At the memory of sharing his climax, she melted inside, already as wet as if they stood there naked together.

An answering surge of desire welled from him. How did he know how she felt? Or did he? Maybe his lust sprang up spontaneously. She had trouble visualizing herself as

an irresistible sex object, yet the attention felt good, not like the crude appetites of her past would-be boyfriends. While he continued rubbing the middle of her back, sending spirals of warmth through her body, his other hand stroked her hair until she wanted to purr. Cupping her head, he nuzzled the side of her neck. Tiny electric shocks zapped her spine. He nibbled along her jawline. A moan escaped her throat. She tilted her head, her lips parted.

With a hissing breath, he brushed his mouth over hers. She sensed him holding back, his desire straining at its leash. Why did he fight the hunger to kiss her? Her tongue teased his lips in one rapid flick that was all her own self-consciousness allowed. He gasped and covered her open mouth with his. Sliding his hand down her back, he clasped her bottom and wedged her against his hardness. His tongue darted in and out of her mouth in vigorous thrusts that she sensed he could barely keep his pelvis from imitating.

Though his teeth scraped the corner of her mouth, the minor pain hardly registered. He suckled alternately on her upper and lower lip as if trying to devour her. He obviously had no more experience with kissing than she had. But the awkwardness didn't matter. Panting, tasting, groping, she wanted nothing more than to rip off their clothes and beg him to fill every hollow space inside her.

A strange sound rumbled in his chest, something like a growl. A new emotion overshadowed his arousal. Fear verging on panic.

He tore his mouth free of hers, pried her hands off him and whirled around. With his back to her, he shuddered, his fists curling and uncurling. He exhaled fear with every rasping breath. She sensed that he believed sharing sexual pleasure with her would make something terrible happen.

She struggled to catch her own breath. At last he turned around and spoke, his voice harsh. "We can't do this. It's wrong."

Chapter Five

Her cheeks burned as if she'd just stepped out of a sauna. "You're right," she mumbled. "We have to get going." What had possessed her, making out while Chloe was being rushed to the emergency room with a broken leg? Maybe, Tabitha thought, her folks were right about her freakishness. And what was wrong with Kenji? Did he have some kind of phobia or guilt complex about sex so severe that even kissing triggered panic? Yet he seemed normal most of the time, quiet and kind.

Without another word, he retreated into one of the back rooms. Grateful for the respite, she waited for her face to cool and her heartbeat to slow down. Kenji reappeared wearing a shirt, tennis shoes and khaki shorts and dangling a set of car keys. The two of them didn't look at each other while they walked outside and got into his car, an economy-style compact not much different from her own. By the time they fastened their seat belts and he pulled out of the driveway, humiliation over the way she'd almost eaten him alive had wiped out her excitement. His feelings echoed hers, the lust and fear receding as embarrassment took over. She had no idea why a moment of near-intimacy had thrown him into a panic, but this was no time to puzzle over such things. At her house, she dashed inside to throw a few of Chloe's things into an overnight bag. The task reminded Tabitha to focus on her sister's predicament, and having a couple of walls and doors between Kenji and herself helped to cool her the rest of the way.

When they reached the town after a silent half-hour trip, he dropped her at the hospital's emergency entrance and drove off to find a space in the parking lot. Tabitha gritted her teeth and squared her shoulders, symbolic acts that wouldn't add a fraction of an inch to the layer of armor around her brain. Against the psychic barrage she knew she would face inside, that armor would feel more like a sheet of tinfoil.

The moment she walked through the automatic doors, pain and fear slammed her from all sides. And the emergency room, not much bigger than her living room, wasn't even especially crowded. In one corner sat a mother holding a feverish little boy who whimpered with a headache. Across the room, a woman with stomach cramps waited her turn. Beyond the swinging doors leading to the treatment area, somebody had a crushing chest pain, endurable because the walls partly blocked it. His fear of a heart attack echoed the physical distress. Last, Tabitha sensed Chloe's consciousness, blurry as if she'd been medicated

At the window Tabitha introduced herself to the receptionist, who gave her a clipboard of paperwork to fill out. She sat on one of the molded plastic chairs and started writing, using the routine as a shield against the swarm of emotions and sensations. She glanced up when she felt a soothing presence reach out to surround her. Kenji sat next to her. Concern swirled around him like an aromatic mist.

"You look like you're the one who got hurt," he said.

She realized she'd knotted her forehead so tightly her brow ached. Forcing her muscles to smooth out, she said, "I'm okay." To her surprise, she did feel the emotional clamor around her less acutely with his warmth muffling it. She puzzled over the blank lines on the form in her lap. She knew her parents' health insurance company, of course, but not the policy number. That question reminded her she would have to call them soon.

She'd just handed the clipboard back to the receptionist when a slim, black nurse opened the swinging door and called her name. The inner room smelled like disinfectant with a trace of vomit in the background. On top of the pain from the man with the heart attack and the miasma of fear emitted by him and the woman sitting beside him, the odors made Tabitha queasy. Now that she'd left Kenji behind in the waiting room, she realized how much his caring had shielded her against the negative sensations. She drew shallow breaths through her mouth and followed the nurse to the

corner where Chloe lay. A doctor with a high forehead and bushy mustache was examining her leg.

He introduced himself and shook Tabitha's hand. He projected confidence under a layer of mild fatigue. "Fortunately, your sister has only a simple fracture. She'll have to wear a cast for a couple of months. I understand you're not her legal guardian?"

"No way!" The horror of that notion made the emphatic denial leap out of Tabitha's mouth before she realized how rude it sounded. "She's just visiting. Our parents live in Norfolk."

"Did you tell them yet?" asked Chloe, her voice slurred by painkillers.

"No, I'll do that in a minute. They'll want to come pick you up, I guess." She clasped her sister's damp hand. A dull ache from the broken bone and anxiety over their parents' probable reaction seeped through the contact, fogged by the drugs.

Chloe's eyes drifted from Tabitha to the waiting room doors. "What about Shawn?"

"Who? Oh, the guy you were trying to meet?"

A small nod. "I've got to let him know what happened to me."

Tabitha debated for a few seconds whether to leave the subject hanging. No, she had to tell the truth eventually and might as well get it over with. "Don't worry about that. I met him and told him to stop bothering us. He left."

"You what?" A whiplash of anger crackled from Chloe. She tried to sit up and yelped in pain. The doctor made her lie flat again.

Tabitha winced at the double sting. "Listen, I may not be your guardian, but if I'm temporarily responsible, I'm not about to let you run off and elope or something."

"Elope? It's not like we were planning to get married." Her voice dropped to a drowsy mumble.

"I sure hope not. What did you think you were doing?"

"We just want to be together. He loves me." She believed that claim. No trace of doubt colored her thoughts. "Where do you get off butting in? And how did you know

where to find him anyway?" The anger swelled into fury. "You read my e-mail, didn't you?"

"I was trying to do what's best for everybody."

Chloe snatched her hand away and closed her eyes. "Don't do me any favors." The words felt like a slap in the face.

The doctor said, "Let her get some rest. You can settle this later." Impatience and faint disapproval of their public bickering tinged the orders.

Tabitha turned away, half blinded by a gray cloud of negative emotions like a gathering thunderstorm, and staggered into the waiting room. When a hand gripped her arm to guide her to a chair, the cloud vanished.

Kenji's touch lingered as he said, "You don't look too good. Maybe I should take you home."

"In a minute. I have to call my folks." She rummaged in the bottom of her purse for her cell phone and started for the door.

He followed her outside. "Will your sister be all right?"

"Yeah, it's just one broken bone, the way you thought." The cool air, even with gas fumes from the parking lot, smelled better than the atmosphere in the ER. More important, the doors protected her from most of the turmoil inside. She flipped the phone open and punched her parents' number while Kenji walked off, probably to the car.

Tabitha's throat clogged when the phone started ringing. The prospect of this conversation felt like the time she'd stayed too late at a party in high school and tried to sneak in after curfew, or like scraping the car's fender and having to explain the damage to her father. She combed her fingers through her hair in an exasperated gesture, wishing she could scoop the irrational anxiety out of her brain. She wasn't a teenager anymore. They couldn't ground her or dock her allowance. And over the phone, she didn't have to worry about feeling their emotions.

Her father's voice barked, "Hello? Who's this?"

"It's me, Dad. Chloe's here." She hastily added, "She's going to be okay."

"What do you mean, going to be? She isn't now?"

Tabitha's pulse pounded in her temples. She had to gulp a breath to keep from stammering. "She fell down on one of the trails." That explanation sounded less dire than tumbling into a ravine. "She broke her leg, but it's not too bad."

On the other end, her father relayed the information to her mother. Tabitha heard her mother say, "Give me that!" and then, "Tabby, what on earth is going on? When did Chloe get there?"

"Late this afternoon."

"And you didn't bother to call us?"

"I'm calling you now, aren't I? I didn't want to upset her into running away from my place too." The excuse sounded as weak in her own ears as the one she'd given for a failed test in junior high school science.

"That wasn't for you to decide. I'd think by this age you'd have better judgment."

Before Tabitha could come up with a defense, her father reclaimed the phone. "What hospital is she in? Do you have the address and phone number?"

She recited them from the notes she'd jotted down while filling out the paperwork. A siren wailed a few blocks away, and she covered her free ear to muffle the noise.

"Fine, we'll be there in the morning." His voice warmed a fraction of a degree. "Don't mind your mother. She's just upset."

From the background came, "I am not—"

"Bye, Dad. I'll see you tomorrow." Tabitha glanced at her watch. Almost three a.m. "I mean this morning, I guess." She switched off before her mother could jump into the conversation again.

Only then did she notice Kenji's car idling at the curb. Dropping the phone in her purse, she started in his direction. He stepped out and strode around to open the

passenger door. At the same moment, the siren's scream rose to a crescendo and cut off as an ambulance pulled into the bay next to the pedestrian entrance. Halfway into the front seat of the car, Tabitha watched the paramedics lift a gurney out of the vehicle and wheel the patient into the ER. She caught a glimpse of a young man with the sheet covering his torso soaked in blood. His agony stabbed her in the gut.

She doubled over, clutching her stomach. A groan erupted from her clenched jaws. Her head reeled with the man's terror and the tension that reverberated between the two EMTs attending him. Tendrils of black and crimson swarmed in her vision.

She felt hands settling her in the car and buckling the seat belt around her, heard doors slam, sensed an arm around her shoulders and breath ruffling her hair.

"Tabitha, what's wrong? Should I take you inside and get a doctor?" The words quivered with the strain of Kenji's fear for her.

"No, not that!" Shaking, she forced her voice under control. "I'm not sick. Just get me away from here, and I'll be okay."

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply while the car pulled out of the hospital lot and accelerated onto the road. His concern lapped around her like wavelets in a tide pool. After a few minutes, the effects of the most recent psychic barrage faded. She looked over at him, and he met her glance with a brief smile.

"Feeling better? Can you tell me what happened back there?"

Tell him? And have him write her off as either a nutcase or a mutant? "You wouldn't believe me."

A shadow flitted across the surface of his mind. "You'd be surprised what I'd believe." He cast her a look weighted with trepidation. She felt he wanted to explain further but couldn't bring himself to take the risk. "Come back to my place for a while. I don't want to leave you alone like this."

"Okay." She released the tightness in her chest in a long sigh. She knew she shouldn't expose herself to the naked emotions of any man, no matter how sweet and seductive, because the shattering of the fragile union would only hurt more than

keeping her distance. But she couldn't resist a few hours of pretending she could handle intimacy like a normal woman.

When they reached the intersection with their road, Tabitha blinked at the unexpected sight of a two-seater sports car parked on the side of the highway. "That car looks familiar."

As soon as they turned into the lane, a figure stepped in front of Kenji's car, waving. With a muttered curse, he screeched to a stop. Tabitha recognized the silver-tipped black hair at once. "That's Chloe's boyfriend."

The boy—Shawn—circled to the passenger door and yanked it open. "Where the hell is she?"

Tabitha braced herself to keep from cringing. "What are you talking about?"

Kenji got out and walked around the front of the car. "I suggest you back off and leave her alone."

"Not until she tells me where Chloe went." Shawn clutched Tabitha's arm. Kenji grabbed him by the shoulder to pull him off.

"No, wait," she said. She sensed more anxiety than rage emanating from the boy. "Chloe's in the hospital, but she'll be okay. She fell down and broke her leg trying to get to that meeting with you."

"You're lying. You just don't want us together." Behind his belligerence lurked honest worry about Chloe's welfare.

"You know I'm not lying." Tabitha reached out mentally to collect the strands of his tangled emotions and weave them into a smoother pattern. For a second she had a grasp on the threads, but they slipped from her fingers. "What are you doing back here anyway?"

"You didn't think I'd let you chase me away permanently, did you? I figured, so what if she can read my mind."

"I can't—" She glanced at Kenji, whose outrage at the attack mingled with confusion. *Oh, hell, now I'll have to come up with an explanation whether I'm ready or not.*

"So after I got over whatever you did to me," Shawn continued, "I drove up there looking for your house. Only two houses, so it wasn't hard to find. Nobody was home. With your car still parked here, I decided this was the best place to wait. I figured you had to show up eventually."

"Well, here I am, and I told you what happened to Chloe. She's in the hospital in town, and our parents are coming to pick her up in a couple of hours."

"Just like that? Damn it, I'm not letting you take her away until I see her."

His rage scalded her. His fingers dug into her arm hard enough to bruise. She probed the surface of his thoughts again, trying to calm the storm enough to make him listen. He did care about Chloe. She didn't want to fight with him. She pried his grip loose from her arm and whispered, "It's all right. You can contact her later. There's no reason to get upset."

"You're inside my head again. Bitch freak!"

Kenji seized his shoulders and spun him around. "That's enough! Get the hell out of here!"

Shawn pulled back his right arm for a punch. Kenji dodged the blow and raised both hands, palms out. A gesture of surrender?

No. Something that had to be an illusion. A basketball-size sphere of flame appeared in the air in front of him.

Chapter Six

The greenish fire dazzled her eyes. How did Kenji do it? Some kind of magician's trick? Where in the pockets of his shorts would he have room to carry the supplies? And how did the sphere float toward Shawn when the boy backed away? How could it follow his every move while he ducked and swerved in his retreat?

"Go!" Kenji yelled. "Now!" The last word sounded more like a howl than human speech. With his back to Tabitha, he chased Shawn toward the highway, with the fireball dancing in midair between them. She stood up, straining her eyes to follow their movements in the shadows under the trees. The fireball vanished while Shawn disappeared into the darkness, and seconds later his car engine accelerated in the distance. Kenji leaned over, facing away from her, his hands on his bent knees. His emotions whirled like a tornado.

She staggered toward him. His loud, harsh breathing echoed the turbulence in his head. She thought she heard an animal's growl, but that had to be her imagination. Any normal wild creature would flee from the noise of human voices and footsteps. Just before she got close enough to touch Kenji, he shouted, "Stay back!" She could hardly understand the words, thick and guttural.

Was he sick? The chaos of his fury, panic and despair buffeted her like hurricane winds. She collapsed to her knees, hugging herself to form a flimsy barrier. Squeezing her eyes shut, she prayed for the storm to die down before it ripped her apart.

Little by little, it faded. She heard his breathing slow to normal and felt him lock his emotions inside whatever cage they had escaped from. She opened her eyes and used a low-hanging branch to pull herself upright. With soundless, hesitant steps, Kenji came to her side. Momentarily, she thought she saw golden sparks gleaming in his eyes. No,

only an illusion. They were gone now. When he touched her forearm, his fingers felt as hot as if he had a fever.

"Did that jerk hurt you?" His fingers slid up her arm to her shoulder, slipping under the short sleeve of her shirt. Though his skin scorched hers, the contact made her shiver.

"No," she whispered. Still trembling, she hugged him around the waist and rested her forehead on his shoulder. She felt him hesitate for a second before putting one arm around her. His body radiated heat while his mind emitted a tangle of fear, anger and desire.

He wanted her as much as she wanted him. Or did she? Why did lust ignite within her every time they touched? Was she feeling her own need, born of lifelong celibacy and years of loneliness? Or did her hunger only echo his?

This has to be real. I have my own feelings, I know I do. She'd felt attracted to him the other times they'd met. Only her emotional bruises from past attempts at intimacy had kept her from acting on the attraction. To prove that claim to herself, she raised her head, stood on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his.

She heard a hitch in his breath, felt his surge of gratitude for the gesture, blurred by the same strange apprehension that had tinged his feelings before. Her tongue probed between his lips. The tip of his tongue flickered to meet hers then retreated. With a shuddering sigh, he moved his mouth over hers as if sampling her flavor.

She wondered whether he was erect. The thought made warm liquid gush from her slit. Shifting her legs, she tried to press her hips against his.

For a second she felt his hardness, and his lips parted. Their tongues met again. A miniature bolt of lightning flashed through her. The next instant, he broke off the kiss.

"I'm sorry." He stepped back, his breath fast and shallow. "I shouldn't hassle you that way on top of what that guy did."

Tabitha shook her head. She had to wait for dizziness to fade before she could speak. "I'm okay. And he's not as bad as I thought he was. He's really worried about

Chloe.” The remark slipped out before she realized Kenji would wonder how she knew Shawn’s state of mind.

He didn’t seem to catch the discrepancy though. Anxiety about her overshadowed his thoughts. “Then what was wrong with you a minute ago? Are you sick?”

She almost giggled, hearing him ask the same thing she’d wondered about him. “Like I said, you wouldn’t believe me.”

“And like I said before, you’d be surprised how easily I’d believe a lot of strange things.” He slid his arm around her waist again, lightly this time, to guide her back to the car. “Come to my place, the way we planned, so you can rest until you feel better and explain what’s going on. Unless I’ve scared you away.” The tremor in his voice confirmed his worry about her reaction.

“Scared? No.” But she was more intrigued than before. “So you can believe six impossible things before breakfast, huh?” she said after getting into the car.

“I hope you can too because I want to show you one of them.” Though his voice held steady, she sensed the trepidation behind it. Whatever he planned to show her, he feared scaring her with it. What secret could he have that was weirder than her own?

“That’ll work out,” she said, trying to keep her tone light, “because breakfast is still hours away.”

“Sorry, I didn’t think about that. You must be hungry. I’ll fix you something.”

“Food hasn’t even occurred to me. After all, I don’t usually eat at midnight, and I’ve been worrying about Chloe.” Her insides still felt tied in knots from barricading herself against more physical and emotional pain than she normally confronted in a full year.

A few minutes later, they pulled into Kenji’s driveway. Just inside his front door he paused to take off his shoes, so she did the same. Again the clean aroma of freshly cut wood wafted from the back of the house. She retreated to the bathroom at the end of a short hallway, a welcome refuge from the puzzling blend of eagerness and nervousness that swirled around him. She splashed water on her flushed cheeks and drank a glass to

quench the thirst she hadn't noticed until then. The emptiness in her stomach might be hunger or simply the void left by wrung-out emotions. She couldn't tell for sure.

When she returned to the living room, she found Kenji sitting on the floor pouring tea from a porcelain pot on a tray on the coffee table. Beside two handleless cups in the same flowered pattern as the teapot sat a plate of rice crackers along with a rectangle of some brick-red substance. "Sit down and have a drink," he said, "and tell me your unbelievable secret whenever you feel ready." His shy grin lit up his face. "I promise I won't run screaming into the woods."

"It's not that horrible," she said, "just weird." She blew on the steaming liquid in her cup and took a sip. Green tea, with a delicate flavor that reminded her a little of the aroma of freshly mown grass. "I don't want you to think I'm either a lunatic or a mutant. The thing is, ever since I can remember, I've been reading people's feelings, emotional and physical."

She sensed his heartbeat skip in momentary alarm. "You can tell what I'm thinking?"

Her spirits sagged. *Here we go again. It's been nice meeting you, hope you enjoyed the tea, so long.* How did she dare imagine he'd react differently from anyone else? "Not thoughts. Just emotions and sensations."

"Oh." The ruffled surface of his mind smoothed over. "I'm not surprised."

"Huh?" With a shaky hand, she set the cup down with a slosh.

"I knew your grandmother for years. I suspected she had some kind of power like that."

The world froze like a stopped clock. She forced herself to breathe, and everything started up again. "How did you guess?"

"I felt it. Whenever we met, she projected an aura of peace. I always felt calm around her. It was like she knew when I happened to be upset about anything, and she soothed it away."

"Did you know her well?" Surely not, or Grandmama would have introduced them.

He shook his head. "Not really. I made a coffee table for her." He looked down into his cup. "I've wondered if you still have it."

"The one carved out of a tree stump? I love it."

He flushed with obvious pleasure. "After that, we met casually now and then, and every time she filled me with..." He seemed to grope for a word. "Serenity."

Tabitha nodded. "She did that for me too. With her was the only time I felt completely relaxed."

"Can you do that the way she did?"

"I wish. She did try to teach me to shape people's emotions. It doesn't usually work for me. Maybe I'm trying too hard, because they seem to pick up on it and get more disturbed instead of less. I can only influence animals."

"Yeah?" An odd tinge of hopefulness colored the word.

"Well, and sometimes little kids. I could make Chloe calm down until she got old enough to notice what I was doing. But the cat couldn't resist. Nobody else in the family could lure him into his cage when he had to go to the vet." She smiled at the memory. "I felt where he was hiding and coaxed him out by imagining I was touching him, stroking his fur flat instead of all bristly. I got along fine with pets. I just had trouble with people."

"Even your parents?" The question held wistful overtones. She remembered his folks were both dead.

"Half the time they thought I was making up stuff and yelled at me for lying. The other half, they believed in my abilities and tried to hide how nervous they felt about the whole thing."

"So you moved here after your grandmother died."

"Yeah, she left the place to me. I think she must've needed shelter almost as much as I do, except that she could shield against the stress better. She had that control I couldn't develop. The cabin used to be hers and Granddad's summer place. After he died, she had it fixed up and moved into it full time. She invited me to hide here whenever Mom and Dad would let me." Her throat clogged with sadness. Since Grandmama's death, she hadn't been able to discuss her "problem" with anybody. Not until this moment.

"You miss her a lot," Kenji said softly.

"Yeah." She swallowed. "She practically rescued me from going insane by leaving me the house. I love the isolation. It saves me from constantly getting battered by people's emotions." She nibbled a rice cracker. "Thing is, every time I get into a group of people, it seems worse than the time before. Like tonight at the hospital. It felt like getting caught in a hurricane. High wind, deafening thunder and pounding rain all at once."

"That's a special case, isn't it?" He cut a slice of the reddish substance on the plate. "Other than hospital emergency rooms, is it possible the problem's getting worse because you're out of practice?"

Her eyes widened. "I didn't think of that. Maybe." Her shoulders sagged. "But after tonight, I don't think I could get up the nerve to test the theory anytime soon." She accepted the slice he handed her on a napkin. "What's this?"

"Red bean paste."

It tasted like firm, mildly sweet tofu. "What inspired you to live out here in the middle of nowhere, as my folks call it? Grandmama mentioned it to me when you started building the house. She said she wouldn't mind having a neighbor as long as he wasn't right next door. That was just a couple of years before she died."

"I needed a refuge too." Tabitha noticed he didn't volunteer the reason for that need. "After Mom died, Dad went downhill pretty fast. He wasn't very old, but he

didn't want to live on without her. Maybe it sounds hokey, but they had a super romantic relationship."

"Doesn't sound hokey to me. It must be great." She couldn't suppress a sigh at the thought that she'd probably never have a love like that.

He smiled. "Right, though it's a little weird thinking of my parents that way. Anyhow, he had three heart attacks, and the last one killed him. He'd made good investments after he retired from the Navy, and he left a big life insurance policy too. So I decided to buy this land and become a hermit."

"You didn't have any other relatives to hassle you about that?"

"No. Dad was an only child and so am I. I've wished I had a brother." He grinned. "Although now I'm not so sure, after watching you and Chloe."

"Oh, it wasn't always this bad. As my baby sister, she was kind of fun to have around." She sighed at the memory of acting out adventures with dolls as fairy princesses riding pastel, plush unicorns, with a stuffed tiger standing in for a fierce dragon. Tabitha's empathic gift had served as an advantage then, enhancing the imaginary peril of the games. "We got along okay until she turned into a smart-mouthed teenager. She thought I was invading her mental space, so she threw fits every time I looked at her the wrong way."

"And I bet that made things worse because her negative emotions hurt you."

"That's right." His ability to discuss her power so calmly made her muscles slacken in release of a tension she hadn't realized existed.

"I heard her call you Tabby. That sounded kind of cute, like she doesn't exactly hate you. Should I call you that?"

She said with a wry smile, "Depends on how long you want to keep living. Do people call you Ken?"

He chuckled. "Not if I can help it." He unfolded his crossed legs and stood up. "Now I want to show you something. I promised you something impossible. It runs in my family, the way empathy does in yours."

"You have a deep, dark secret too?"

He nodded, quietly serious, with trepidation leaking through his calm facade. She followed him across the room.

Two doors led from the living room into the back half of the house. One, she knew from previous visits, opened into the hall that connected with the kitchen, bedroom and workshop. He headed for the other exit, which led to the corridor that ended in the bathroom. Two closed doors occupied the wall to the right of the bathroom.

"This is just the linen closet," he said, indicating the one on the left. "But this..."

Good grief, what does he keep in there, a bunch of dead wives like Bluebeard? She could almost hear his heart hammering with nervousness.

Kenji hesitated with his hand on the doorknob. "I've never shown this to anyone before. I'm trusting you to keep it to yourself."

"I promise."

"Good," he said with a sudden grin, "because this is definitely something nobody would believe."

"Like that ball of fire you chased Shawn with?"

"Stranger than that." He opened the door and turned a dial just inside. A diffuse light came on. He raised the level to a gentle glow, too dim to read by but enough to banish the darkness. Other than noticing the room had no windows, Tabitha didn't waste time looking for the source of the illumination. She was too stunned by what the light revealed.

She stood on the threshold of a square space that looked larger than all the other parts of the house combined. At least, it appeared square from what she could see of the walls, camouflaged by potted shrubs, flowers and dwarf trees. She saw peonies, purple

irises and other blooms she didn't recognize. A blossomy fragrance permeated the cool air. Just inside the door, a pond sparkled with the silver of lazily swimming fish. A miniature waterfall cascaded over shiny pebbles into the pond. Lily pads floated on the surface. A stone lantern about two feet high stood next to it.

Her eyes tracked the paths—darker wood inlaid amid the golden hardwood—that wound among the shrubbery. Against one wall she noticed a hibachi with a black lacquer cabinet beside it. A high screen painted with drooping willow trees hid one corner. In the opposite corner the path led to a sunken whirlpool tub, bordered with marble. Cushions in assorted sizes covered the floor nearby.

She'd unconsciously taken a couple of steps into the room, she realized when she heard Kenji shut the door behind her. In the silence, softened only by the waterfall's ripple, she heard him hold his breath, his mind taut with anticipation.

Finally he whispered, "Well?"

She whispered back, half afraid the place would pop like a bubble if she spoke too loudly. "You're right, this is impossible."

"I told you," he said in a more normal tone, "six impossible things before breakfast." He waved a hand. A flame leaped up in the stone lantern. Another wave, and a fireball floated to the ceiling. He dialed the electric light back to its dimmest setting.

"No, I mean *really* impossible." Her lungs felt as constricted as if she'd hiked to the top of a mountain. "The house doesn't have nearly enough space to hold this room. This should be a closet."

"For anybody else, it would be a combination broom closet and half bath. Only I can open the door and find this space. I and anybody I've escorted here. Which means only you."

Her next breath turned into a gasp. She drew a deeper one and said, "Why would you trust me that much?"

"I want to know you better. That can't happen if I keep hiding everything about myself. You saw the fireball, so you're bound to have questions. This seemed like the next step. Anyway, you trusted me with your secret." With a hand on her shoulder, he guided her to the cushions and lowered her to a seat like a courtier settling a princess on a throne.

"Yeah, but this is a whole different order of strangeness. How?"

He shrugged. "Call it magic if you want. A talent I inherited from my mother."

"Okay, this makes two impossible things so far."

"No, three, counting your emotion-reading power."

"So what are the other three?"

A shadow flitted across his face. "Let's hold off on them for now, okay?"

"Your mother, huh? She could make whole rooms appear out of nowhere? What else could she do?"

"Lots more than I can. Seduce men."

"I guess you inherited that power too. To seduce women, I mean. I've seen a sample." Their eyes met, and she felt her face flushing at the same time as his reddened.

"I didn't plan that. It just happened." The words rang true. Tabitha had sensed how he'd tried to quench his arousal. "Mom warned me, said I'd have to be careful."

Careful how? Why? The evasive shifting of his eyes didn't encourage questions. "Men fell for her? Like your father?"

"Maybe it started with the magic. I know she loved my dad though. Enough to give up her home and live halfway around the world." Sadness shadowed the words. "That's probably why she died so young. Pneumonia, they said, but I think she pined away because she was cut off from her land. That's important to our people. Our family. That's why she created a place like this for herself. It helped for a while."

"So why aren't you pining away?"

"Virginia is my home. I was born here, so this is the land I'm tied to."

She scanned the room again, still dazed by her surroundings. "Is any of this real? What about the fish?" Tabitha stood up and walked to the pond. A foot or two long, the fish swam in lazy circles, displaying their black, scarlet, and silver bands.

"Of course it's real. You're seeing and touching it, aren't you?" He took a mundane-looking can of dried shrimp out of the cabinet. "They're koi. Want to feed them?"

She accepted the can and sprinkled a handful of shrimp flakes on the water. The koi rose to the surface and gulped the fragments. "Granted, they look solid enough."

"Oh, they're for-real real. I can't produce live animals. Mom could have, maybe, but I bought these at a pet shop."

"And you just conjured up everything else." She retreated to the cushions and sank into the soft heap, her breath escaping in a gust of amazement.

"Mom taught me, before she died. She needed a refuge of her own that no outsider could find, and she knew I would too. We practiced together until I got it right. Little things. She let me help redecorate her secret garden sometimes." His eyes seemed focused on a distant vision. "Hers wasn't just one room. It was like stepping into another world."

"Where did she get this magic from?"

Kenji sat down next to her on the cushion and dragged his gaze back from whatever memory had snared him. "Like I said, it runs in the family. Just think of it as inscrutable Oriental lore."

Though she sensed the lid he kept on the rest of the truth, she couldn't insist on prying open that locked box. Not yet. If she'd found a man who could accept her strangeness without freaking out, though, surely he would eventually show her his innermost secrets. "So the magic made the plants and the hot tub and all this stuff?" If she hadn't felt his emotions as keenly as ever, she might have suspected herself of dreaming. But her power never operated in dreams.

"Want to try it out? The tub, I mean."

Her cheeks warmed. "In what? You don't have a woman's bathing suit around, do you?"

"What's wrong with underwear? It covers as much as swimsuits." He stood up and took her hand to help her to her feet.

Her pulse quickened at the clasp of his fingers. "Why do you want to do that? I can tell you're nervous about it. Scared."

He winced. "This empathy stuff will take some getting used to. I'm inviting you because I want to prove I can. To prove we can share a simple hot tub like friends, and I can stay in control."

Control of what? she wanted to scream. But of course she didn't. He'd already revealed more to her than she'd dared hope, and she sensed that, unlike her, he hid more layers of secrets. Did he fear their mutual lust would turn him into a raving maniac? The idea of that almost made her giggle aloud. Nobody had ever accused her of being an irresistible sex goddess. If that was his secret dread, she wouldn't push him to confess it.

"Okay, I'm all for friendship," she said.

"I'm glad." His fingers skimmed her hair. "I've decided I don't like being a hermit as much as I expected to."

"Me neither."

With a sigh, she involuntarily swayed toward him. He fingered the nape of her neck. A shiver trickled down her spine, and she felt a shudder run through him too.

He removed his hand, stepped backward and said, "Just friendship. For now."

Her throat closed up. She could only nod her agreement. For the first time, she let herself hope they might share something more.

Chapter Seven

After a couple of deep breaths, he spoke in a more normal tone. "You'll find a robe behind the screen there, if you want to wear it."

It turned out that the screen hid a sink and commode. One of the hooks on the wall above the towel rack held a jade green, kimono-style garment. After peeling off her shorts and shirt, she slipped on the robe over her bra and panties and tied the sash around her waist. The silky fabric shimmered over her skin like a cool breeze.

Wide-eyed, she stared at herself in the mirror. *Okay, I'm dreaming, right? Not that I'm in a hurry to wake up, but this can't be real, can it?* She might have believed that claim, except that she'd never had a dream this long and detailed, nor one in which she could read emotions. In dreams the clamor of feelings and sensations that normally plagued her fell silent.

She expelled pent-up breath in a long sigh and stepped around the screen. The overhead electric light had been switched off. In addition to the fireball hovering in the middle of the ceiling, swarms of greenish sparks like fireflies danced above her head. A lush jasmine scent permeated the room. Kenji already sat in the foaming whirlpool bath, submerged to mid-chest. His glossy black hair, damp and disheveled, made her long to rake her fingers through it. Steam hovered in the air over the water. A stack of beach towels had materialized next to the sunken tub. "Come on." He beckoned to her. She thought she glimpsed a glow in his eyes again. The surface of his mind rippled with suppressed eagerness like a lake ruffled by a breeze.

Swallowing the lump that still clogged her throat, she shrugged off the kimono and draped it over the nearest shrub. She felt his gaze alight on her breasts then dart aside. Thankful that she'd worn a bra this time, she stuck one foot into the water. The heat, just short of scalding, made her halt with a hiss of shock.

"Go ahead, you'll get used to it in a minute."

Eager to hide under the bubbles, she gritted her teeth, put both feet on the ledge at the side of the tub and lowered herself onto the seat across from Kenji. The hot water that enveloped her up to her shoulders made her gasp. "Wow!"

He grinned. "Great, isn't it? Have a drink." He reached onto the marble deck for a porcelain cup, one of two sitting next to a matching blue and white decanter. He gently set the cup on the surface of the water and let go of it. Instead of tipping and spilling, it floated on the current produced by the whirlpool pump.

Tabitha watched it sail in a circle around the edge of the tub. When it came near her, she plucked it out of the eddy and found it half full of clear liquid. She took a sip. Warm sake. An involuntary "Mmm" escaped from her. The semi-sweet rice wine settled in her stomach and radiated comfort through her veins. Already she felt the water's heat as pleasant instead of near-painful. The froth made her nipples tingle, and the bubbling outflow from the pump behind her tantalized the space between her thighs. Her muscles seemed to melt in the steam. No chlorine stung her nose and eyes. Maybe the pool stayed clean by magic instead of chemicals.

Kenji filled his own cup and emptied it in one shot before setting it on the tub's rim. "This is one of my favorite places. It always calms me down. I hoped it would do the same for you."

She nodded and stretched her arms along the edge of the pool. "I wouldn't mind having one of these myself."

He spread his own arms until their fingertips almost brushed. "You can use mine anytime. Now that I've invited you in, why waste it?" His gold-flecked, chocolate-brown eyes silently begged for a favorable answer.

"I'd like that." She leaned her head back on the rim and watched the firefly lights circle the ceiling. "You're sure this place won't go poof and vanish while we're in it?"

"Not a chance. As long as I live, it'll stay solid."

"I still don't understand how it can exist. It wouldn't fit inside the walls of the house, so where is it?"

"If you can't accept that it's just magic, think of it as another dimension, a pocket of space at right angles to all the other dimensions."

"Including time?" A sudden memory from fairy tales and myths struck her. She sat up straight and shifted her gaze from the ceiling to his face. "Will I walk out of here and discover weeks have passed?"

He laughed softly. "Nothing like that. Mom's refuge worked in the opposite direction. You could spend as much time inside as you wanted and lose only a few minutes from the mundane world. I don't have that kind of power. Time in here runs the same as outside."

"Okay. I won't miss meeting my parents at the hospital. Not that I'm exactly looking forward to facing them." The understatement hid her true feelings, barely suppressed panic at the thought of their anger.

"Or all that hospital chaos?" His voice lapped over her as gently as the hot water. "Don't worry about that. I'll stay with you the whole time." He reached another couple of inches to lace his fingers through hers.

The jolt of electricity down her arm to her breasts distracted her from the sting of tears. Nobody else except her grandmother had ever reacted to her talent with sympathy. She drank the rest of her sake and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "That's the best offer I've had in a long time. The few people who know about me tend to run the other way."

He squeezed the hand he was still holding. "I'm the last person who has any right to do that, with my own deep, dark secrets. Except, well, I have to admit I ran for cover when we crossed paths yesterday."

She bowed her head, knowing the redness of her cheeks revealed her thoughts. He wouldn't have to share her psychic ability to guess what she was remembering. "I can't

blame you there," she murmured. "I didn't mean to invade your privacy." She blushed hotter, with the lame apology digging her into a deeper pit of embarrassment.

"I should apologize to you. You shouldn't have had that forced on you. You felt when I got aroused, didn't you?"

She nodded. "I didn't feel forced," she whispered.

He tugged on her hand. She glided over to him, careful to keep most of her bra-line under the water. "I couldn't help it," he said. "You looked so cute in that clingy T-shirt. I hope that doesn't sound like a pickup line."

"Not to me, because I can tell you mean it." Hovering between his splayed legs and gazing down at the bubbles, she added, "I think you're pretty cute, yourself."

"Thanks, I don't hear that much," he said with a chuckle that quickly faded away. He cupped her chin to raise her head so that their eyes met. His cheeks were as flushed as hers felt. "Simplifies a lot, doesn't it? If you can tell I'm sincere, that should eliminate a ton of misunderstandings."

"Most people don't see it like that. They're afraid of having somebody know when they're lying, even little social lies."

"Up here in the woods, I don't have much chance for social anything, including lies. Which is how I liked it, until you came along." He fingered the side of her jaw. She felt her pulse jump. "You'll know I'm not lying when I say I want to kiss you."

"You want more than that." The air crackled with his growing arousal. Her nerves sparked in response.

"Can we start with kissing? I thought the water might relax me enough that we could go that far, and I could stay in control." His tongue flicked between his parted lips. The pulse fluttered in her neck at the thought of tasting him again.

Who needs control anyway? Was he afraid of spooking her, since he knew she could feel his excitement? She suppressed the impulse to tell him to unleash the passion she felt straining inside him. She wasn't yet sure she really wanted that.

She floated close enough to touch her lips to his cheek. With his hand clasping the nape of her neck, he rubbed the side of his face against hers. Fuzz on his cheeks rasped her skin. She heard him inhale deeply, as if he were savoring her scent. He licked her earlobe. "You taste delicious."

When he turned to plant his mouth on hers, she gasped. His tongue slipped between her parted lips. Clouds of sensual longing emanated from him in tendrils of invisible mist that wreathed around her like incense. She stroked his sleek black hair and brushed back the locks that tumbled over his forehead. He twined his fingers in the loose hairs under her ponytail, while he continued nibbling her lips, and his tongue teased hers. With every breath he exhaled, the mist of arousal that enveloped them grew denser and more fragrant. She tried to close the space between them. Her breasts ached to press against his chest.

To her surprise, he grasped her upper arms and held her off. "I think that went pretty well." His shallow, rapid breathing undercut the flippant comment.

"It went great. Why'd you stop?" She sensed his heart racing as fast as hers.

"I'm not sure it's safe to go farther."

"What do you mean, safe?" His firmly muscled body, slick with a sheen of water, irresistibly tempted her to explore it. She laid her open hand on his chest, where his heart pounded. When she slid her fingers over to graze a nipple, firm as a pebble, he grabbed her hand. "Remember, you can't hide your feelings from me," she said.

He flushed deep red. "Yeah, I know. Yesterday in the woods, you felt when I—came, didn't you?"

"Yes." Her face burned too. It didn't seem right to strip his feelings bare without offering the same honesty about her own. "When you had a climax, I did too."

He didn't look surprised. "Then there's no use denying I want you. But there are reasons why it might not work."

"What reasons?" A tingle in her nipples and clit echoed what she knew he felt at that moment. The tightness and heat grew stronger by the second, swamping any

sensible caution she might have exercised. "I want the same thing." She straddled one of his legs and sat on his thigh before he could stop her. The pressure on her slit made her dizzy with pleasure. She sensed his erection without touching it, and her clit thickened and stiffened in answer. She brushed a fingertip over his left nipple. "Do that to me, please."

He mimicked the action. Both of her nipples sprang to attention. A bolt of lightning zapped from them to the apex of her thighs. She rocked on Kenji's leg. The friction of her wet panties sliding between her cleft and his hard muscles drove her halfway to climax in seconds.

With a growl, he pulled her into his arms and closed his mouth over hers. He tasted like the sake he'd drunk, and she sensed his tongue sampling the same flavor on her. She luxuriated in the way the hug squeezed her breasts against his chest and his hands skimmed in circles over the slick surface of her back. She felt feverish, with her skin too tight. She hungered to eat him alive, or did she feel his craving to devour her? She couldn't separate his longing from her own. Though the torrent swept over her, for once she didn't fear it. His arms supported her and wouldn't let her drown.

When he tore his mouth away from hers, they both struggled to catch their breath. Shuddering, he leaned his forehead on her shoulder. She smoothed his hair, as sleek and soft as an animal's pelt. His teeth closed gently on the skin above her collarbone. "We should stop," he murmured into her neck.

"No, we shouldn't. I want more and so do you." She would never have had the nerve to push the issue so boldly if she hadn't read his desire. His muscles quivered with the strain of resisting his need, and his erection verged on pain. Sharing that sensation made her clit swell so tautly she couldn't hold still. Rocking her hips back and forth, she felt the pressure building. "I want more touching." With one hand, she fumbled behind her back for the hook of her bra. When she got it unfastened, she leaned back long enough to strip it off and fling it away then rubbed her bare breasts on Kenji's chest.

Again he growled, a sound that made her insides vibrate in harmony with it. He buried his face in her throat, planting his teeth there just short of biting down, and suckled. The heat of his mouth made her whole body more sensitive, so that each tiny shift of position made her nipples, the bare skin of her chest and midriff, her inner thighs and her cleft tingle as if a million ants crawled over them. The bubbles felt like fingers caressing her everywhere at once.

"I can't stand much more," he said, his lips still touching her neck. The tickle of his breath made her nerves hum.

"Me neither." She scooted forward on his thigh until his upright shaft bumped her abdomen. "You're so hard. You need a climax." Her face burned with self-consciousness at speaking the words, but her own urgency overrode the embarrassment.

"Yes, damn it!"

"Me too." She rocked faster. "I'm going to come any minute."

With a groan, he held her tighter, compressing her breasts and his cock between their bodies. "Oh, damn, that feels so great. I don't want to stop."

"Then don't," she gasped. "I don't want to—go without you." His lust and hers together felt like a swarm of wasps buzzing in her head. She realized she'd closed her eyes, and sparks flashed behind her lids. The tension in her clit kept building. She clamped her thighs around his leg, wanting him to press deeper into her slit.

"Maybe," he forced out, "maybe it would be—okay—if you use your hand."

She inched backward just far enough to wedge one hand between them. He wore briefs, molded to the hard ridge by the water. She reached under the elastic. His cock sprang up to meet her groping fingers. She wrapped her hand around the shaft and squeezed. The spike in his arousal instantly leaped to her and made her clit twitch on the edge of release.

"Please!" He thrust into her clasp with a frantic up-and-down rhythm. "Like this. Quick!"

She obeyed. The water made his penis slippery. It glided in her palm, driving him to heights of delirium that drew her along with him. His eyes closed as he abandoned himself to the rising pleasure. She sensed him on the verge of erupting. Her clit, echoing the tension in his cock, felt so swollen it might burst. She rubbed it more vigorously on his leg while she stropped his shaft harder, faster, as eager for his release as he was.

When she felt the hot liquid bursting forth, she knew he needed her to squeeze the tip and press her thumb into the ridge at its rim. At that instant, he threw his head back and howled while his semen fountained into the pool. The convulsion seized her at the same moment. The passion that she'd always feared would sweep her under like a tsunami, batter her to unconsciousness and drown her instead rolled over her in powerful yet gentle waves of ecstasy that she wished would go on forever.

Trembling, they sagged into each other's arms. She laid her head on his shoulder, keeping her eyes closed until the world stopped spinning. "Oh, Tabitha..." he whispered. "That was—" She felt him swallow. "I can't thank you enough. I've never done this before. Didn't dare."

"I never have either. With anybody." She lifted her head. "What do you mean, dare? You don't have my problem. Do you?"

"No, mine's worse. But maybe we won't have to worry about it." He let go of her and climbed out of the tub, offering a hand to help her out.

Her wet skin developed goose bumps in the cool air. Wrapping one of the oversized towels around her, he massaged her back through the fluffy cloth. "Can't you tell me about this problem?"

A door in his mind swung shut. "Like I said, maybe it won't matter anymore. We've gotten this far." With another towel, he started drying himself.

"Good," she said, "then we can do it again." She smiled at the surprise that emanated from him. "After waiting all this time, you think I'd be satisfied with just once?"

"Believe me, I'd love to make love to you again. And again and again. I've got plenty of lost time to make up for too." He dropped his towel and rubbed hers vigorously over her shoulders and chest. Her skin tingled with the friction. With her legs almost too jelly-like to stand on, she grasped his upper arms for support and sighed with pleasure. His delight in touching her swirled around her the way the water had a few minutes before. "You need to lie down," he said, his voice husky with longing.

He scooped her up in his arms. She gasped, her head reeling. A second later, he set her on one of the giant cushions a few feet from the tub. She lay back, gazing up at him while he stripped off his soaked briefs. Already his penis looked half-erect. He reclined on his side next to her and pulled a fresh, dry towel over both of them. "I don't want you to get chilled."

Basking in the warmth of his aura, she said, "I don't think it'll feel cool for long. But wet underwear isn't helping." She giggled at his blush, after what they'd just done together, though she felt her face growing pinker too. She guided his hand to her waist. He hooked his fingers in the elastic and peeled her panties down. For a few seconds her legs got tangled in the damp nylon, making them both laugh.

Giddy, she twined her arms around his neck and drew his face close to hers. Again his beard fuzz sandpapered her cheek. The prickles of sensation that started there spread all over her body. She teased his lips with the tip of her tongue.

He rolled on top of her. She spread her legs to cradle his pelvis between them. His stiffening cock wedged into the exact place to put delicious pressure on her clit. She felt his chest growing hot against hers, as if he'd suddenly developed a fever. A glow of arousal welled up in him. The next moment, though, he pushed up on his elbows and shifted his hips away from hers, dismay tainting his pleasure.

"What's wrong?" She wiggled, trying to fit herself under him again.

"I want to give you pleasure," he said, "but I can't come inside you."

Chapter Eight

"Good grief, why not?" His palpable distress made her feel like crying. "If it's protection you're worried about, we can do without it this one time. It's nowhere near my fertile period." As for disease, she sensed the truth of his claim to virginity, so infection was a non-issue. She tightened her embrace around him. "You said you wanted to make love to me. I feel that in you, but I feel this other thing too."

He nuzzled her hair. "I do want to make love to you, over and over. I will. But without entering. Then maybe I can keep control. Keep what I'm worried about from happening."

"Why are you trying to scare me?" She dug her nails into his shoulders.

He winced. "I'm not. Just being careful."

Sensing how her questions upset him, she dropped the subject. Instead of speech, she answered with a tentative kiss. It still seemed like a miracle that she could share this intimacy with any man, open to his every feeling and sensation, with him fully aware of her power. The surge of joy from him confirmed that he too could hardly believe what was happening.

His mouth opened as if hungry to devour her. Parting her lips to meet the thrust of his tongue, she realized that eating image came from him. She didn't mind. The thought of his grazing on her made her melt inside. She wanted his lips and tongue on her whole body at once.

When he lifted his head to gaze at her, she breathed, "More," and pulled him down to bury his face in her neck.

He caught a fold of skin in his teeth, not hard enough to hurt. "I want to taste you everywhere," he murmured. The hum of his voice in the hollow of her throat resonated through her chest and stomach.

"Do it!"

Again he emitted that ravenous growl that turned her insides to molten lava. He licked his way down to her breasts and circled each one with rapid flickers that felt like dancing flames. Her nipples perked up, begging for attention. She guided his mouth to one of them. While he lapped it until she thought it should visibly glow with the heat, the other one ached for the same stimulation. She grasped his right hand and placed it on her breast.

"There," she whispered. He twirled the nipple to an even harder peak, with his tongue still teasing the other one. "Like this." She brushed his fingers over the tip. He strummed it in the same rhythm with which his tongue pleased its twin. "Yes!" She arched her back, eyes closed, and basked in the ripples of sensation. Her cleft melted into liquid heat. She squeezed her thighs together to ease the fresh swelling in her clit.

He moved downward, leaving her moist nipple exposed to cool air. His mouth explored the valley between her breasts and the soft skin of her abdomen. She flinched when his tongue dipped into her navel, but in a second the shock yielded to a new rush of warmth. Meanwhile, his fingers played with both nipples at once. Through the crimson fog of her excitement, she felt his delight at pleasing her. She also felt his arousal growing again. His erection brushed against her leg, but he wouldn't lie on top of her the way he longed to. Why not?

The question fled from her mind when he nipped his way down to the triangle of hair. He rubbed his face against her mound. His hot breath made her clit twitch, and his morning whiskers rasped the insides of her thighs.

"You smell great," he said. A blush spread over her whole body. The next moment, he fastened his mouth onto her and his tongue flicked her clit. She squirmed and his hands moved down to clasp her hips. He licked from her slit to the tip of her clit. "Like that?" he asked.

"Yes!"

He repeated the motion, lapping the full length of her cleft over and over. "Delicious," he murmured. "I could taste your pussy for hours."

"Then don't stop!" The second's pause when he spoke left her already throbbing with impatience. She felt ready to explode, and she sensed his cock almost as near to bursting.

With a soft laugh, he resumed licking her, faster now. The long, methodical strokes left her craving more. "My clit," she gasped. "Stay on my clit."

He obeyed, flicking the firm tip while her hips pumped up and down. He gripped her thighs to keep his mouth on target. Though dizzy with pleasure at the hot, wet caresses on her clit, she needed still more. Her slit yearned to be filled. "Touch inside me!"

One hand moved to her inner thigh, and two fingers probed her vagina. Her clit pulsed in time with his tongue's rhythm, and her sheath contracted around his fingers. She heard a scream and realized it was erupting from her throat. The convulsions rippled through her over and over, until she melted into a puddle of sated exhaustion.

Only then did she float out of her own mind and tune in to Kenji's sensations once more. He'd snuggled up next to her, his muscles taut with unreleased tension, the head of his erect penis barely touching her leg. His arm lying across her chest seared her with its heat. She felt him straining to resist shoving his cock against her for relief.

"You need to come too," she said. "Why are you fighting it? Come inside me."

"No. Do me with your hand again." He held himself rigid as if frightened of what might happen if he moved. "That worked in the tub. It should be okay here too."

Impatience won over any caution his obvious fear might have implanted in her. She rolled on her side and cuddled up to press her body against the length of his. "You're the only man I've ever wanted this way, knowing it's my own desire, not just an echo. I'm not letting you escape." His hardness and the arousal radiating from him stirred her craving anew. She draped one leg over his hip, silently inviting him to sheath himself in her. "My pussy wants your cock." Normally, she'd never think of speaking that way,

and hearing the words from her own mouth made her blush, but she hoped they would stimulate him to forget his fear, whatever caused it.

“Oh, hell, yes!” To her shock, he grabbed her by the shoulders and flipped her onto her stomach.

Her breath rushed out in a whoosh of surprise. “What—”

“Maybe it’ll work this way.” His fingers dug into her hips to raise her onto her knees. She knelt with her legs folded under her and her face turned to one side on the cushion. His cock slid between her thighs, nudging the folds of her pussy.

She didn’t think she could get wetter, but she thought wrong. Another gush of liquid answered his thrusts. She spread her legs, longing for him to plunge deep inside, even if it might hurt. Once more his passion blended with hers so that she could hardly tell them apart. Picking up his urgency, she felt herself nearing the verge of another climax. The head of his penis thrust into her. Somewhere in the background she felt pain, but the need overrode it. She also felt panic rising in him along with the hunger. He snarled aloud. A musky smell tickled her nose, and his skin grew so hot she wondered again if he had a fever. More strangely, the hair on his legs and belly, rubbing her thighs and buttocks, felt coarser and thicker than it should.

His teeth clamped onto the nape of her neck with a stab of pain-laced pleasure. A growl rumbled from his chest through the nerves of her spine.

Her head reeled with his excitement and hers but also with the terror and rage that howled inside his skull.

Abruptly, he pulled out of her. She rolled to her back just in time to see him dashing to the door.

* * * * *

The moment he mounted Tabitha, the fur began to sprout, and his jaws stung as his teeth elongated into fangs. Instinct drove him to bite her neck, to hold her still for his

thrusts. He burned with the change boiling in his blood. *Faster, faster, got to come before I –* Along with the race toward his peak, the transformation surged over him.

Just in time, he caught himself. *Can't let her see this. Have to get away.* His cock already pulsed with the onslaught of climax. With an agonizing effort, he broke away from the satiny tightness of her vagina and fled. He barely made it to the front door and shoved it open before he fell to all fours, and the magic wrenched him out of human shape altogether. He raced onto the front lawn, where he couldn't resist the urge any longer. He convulsed and spurted into the grass.

The last of his human thoughts vanished when he came. The only awareness remaining was that he had to escape, hide, disappear. Anguish he could no longer frame into words overwhelmed him.

But at the edge of the forest he felt the touch of a mind probing his. It snared and tugged him like an invisible leash. Trembling between terror and longing, he waited.

* * * * *

It took her a minute to recover enough to realize he'd actually run out and another few seconds to catch her breath and force her wobbly legs to stand up. *He's not getting away with this! He'll confess what's going on if I have to strangle him!* She snatched up the kimono and shrugged into it as she hurried to the exit. When she emerged from the secret room into the hall, she heard the front door bang shut. He'd run outside. She charged after him. Halfway there, she felt the cyclone of his orgasm sweep over her. It forced her to the floor, where she crouched with her hands wedged between her thighs while she pulsed in release too. His emotions, already in jagged bits, shattered completely. She no longer sensed Kenji at all, only a whirling chaos of animal urges and panic.

On the porch, she paused, struggling for breath, and strained her eyes in the predawn light. Under the trees at the edge of the driveway, a creature the size of a small

collie lurked. When her vision adjusted, she recognized the shape as a fox, though larger than any normal beast of that kind. It shivered, paralyzed with yearning and fear.

She remembered glimpsing that same fox, for surely two of that size couldn't live in these woods, outside Kenji's house the night before. She also remembered how she'd felt his consciousness spring out of nowhere a minute later. Her head spun and the world turned gray. She grabbed a post to keep from collapsing. *Impossible! What I'm thinking can't be!* Yet Kenji had vanished from her perception faster than any human being could run out of her range. Instead, the fox crouched there, watching her as warily as she watched it.

"Kenji?" Her voice quavered. She swallowed and made herself speak more forcefully. "Kenji, if I'm not dreaming or nuts, I know that's you. I'm not going anywhere until you come up here and show yourself." She plopped down on the porch steps.

The fox whined.

"Right, you can understand, can't you? Get over here."

He slunk a few feet closer. *He does understand English. Oh, God, it's really him.* Seized by another wave of dizziness, she had to bow her head to keep from fainting.

Inside his motionless body, a tornado of clashing needs raged. She found it didn't lash her with agony like a human mind in the same condition. Although Kenji's personality lived in this shape, the animal form muted the intensity of the emotions.

She stretched out a hand. "It's okay. I know you won't hurt me." He took a few paces nearer, then pricked his ears forward and trotted up to her. Black hairs mingled with the russet of his fur, his paws were black, he had a snow-white chest, and a white plume tipped his tail. His eyes, though, showed the same liquid brown flecked with gold as Kenji's own. "So this is your terrible secret."

He crept close enough to lay his head on her knees. Panting, he let his tongue loll from his open jaws. Twin rows of fangs showed. He could rip her arm open before she could move, if he wanted to. But he wouldn't. She stroked the sleek pelt on his back. He

let out a long sigh. The agitation in his mind settled under her touch. She found herself soothing him the same way she used to calm her cat. When she scratched behind his ears, his tongue flicked out to lick her other hand. He nuzzled her crotch through the robe. When she flinched at the tantalizing tickle through the silky fabric, he emitted a spark of alarm and pulled back. She stroked his head again and willed him to relax. He rolled on his side, with a low yip of a bark. She couldn't resist ruffling the soft, white fur of his belly. His back legs twitched in rhythm with her brisk rubbing. His penis poked out of its furry sheath, but only contented sensuality, not sexual demand, radiated from him.

"Can you change back?"

A shudder racked him. Heat rolled off him as if from an open fire. Under her palm, his flank softened like clay. The hair melted and vanished. A crimson haze fogged the air. When it evaporated, Kenji's naked body curled on the steps beside her, with his head in her lap.

She smoothed his hair. Still trembling, he hid his face against her stomach.

"You see," he whispered. "That's why I didn't want to take the chance."

"Making love changes you into a fox?" she said, trying to sort out her confusion.

"Any strong emotion, sex, anger, whatever. They all make it hard for me to keep control of the change, sometimes impossible."

She nudged him. "Let's go inside, and you can tell me about it."

He stood up, and they walked inside hand in hand. "You're not scared?"

With a shaky laugh, she said, "I'll let you know after I decide whether I'm dreaming or not. But seriously, why would I be afraid of you? I know you won't hurt me."

"The same reason people act afraid of your power, or more so," he said. "Because it's too strange to accept."

"So that's why you didn't have so much trouble with it."

Instead of heading for the secret room, he led her to his bedroom. With the curtains closed and the sun just rising, she could see little in the dimness, except for a general impression of serene simplicity. "I'm worn out, and you have to be exhausted too. If you're staying, we should get some sleep before we go back to the hospital."

"After we talk."

He folded back the covers of the king-size bed. "You're sure you want to talk, not run away?"

"This is the fourth impossible thing. I can't leave without knowing the whole truth."

He stretched on the bed and held out a hand to her. Struggling to slow down her fast, shallow breathing, she slipped off the kimono and lay next to him, side by side facing each other. He wrapped one arm around her, his palm tracing circles on the center of her back. "Okay, what do you want to know?"

Chapter Nine

"How did you turn into a were-fox?" Her head buzzed with disbelief at hearing herself ask that question. Yet she knew she was awake. She felt the cool sheets and his warm, slightly sweat-dampened skin, smelled his faintly musky scent and sensed the tentative caress of his emotions while he luxuriated in their embrace.

He winced. "Not a were-fox. Kitsune."

"What's that?"

"Actually, I'm half kitsune. My mother was one, a magical fox that can take human form. I don't have her full powers because of my human father."

"How did they get together?"

"When Dad was stationed in Japan, he didn't stick close to the naval base and the big cities the way most of the officers did. He learned some of the language and roamed around the countryside on leave. He met my mother in a small village where his car broke down once."

"And it was love at first sight? That's so romantic."

He shifted position as if groping for the right words. "Well, according to Mom, it started more like lust at first sight." A flush reddened his face and chest. "Fox spirits are highly sexual creatures. A kitsune has supernatural powers of erotic attraction, and she, or he, uses that power to satisfy an almost insatiable appetite. They sicken and pine away without regular relief."

"And you've never had that because you couldn't risk anybody seeing you change."

"I tried once." Pain shadowed his words. "I went with a girl in college. We became close enough that she started wondering why we didn't get intimate. Finally, I couldn't stand being apart from her. I decided to try."

"It didn't work." His sadness made that obvious.

"I had less control then. I started to change even before I was ready to climax. I didn't get away fast enough. She saw — everything."

Tabitha squeezed his shoulder, trying to transmit comfort. She felt his tension slacken under her touch. *It works on him. He's different from other people that way.*

"She freaked out, of course. Screamed. Lucky the apartment had decent insulation so the neighbors didn't hear her and break in to investigate. She threw a lamp at me. At the time I was too panicked to feel it, but later, in human shape, I found cuts from the broken glass."

"Did you ever get to explain?"

"I never saw her again. She hung up on me the one time I called, and no wonder. Later I heard that she'd gone into therapy. She probably thought she'd had a hallucination."

"I'm not surprised you didn't want to risk that again." She brushed a kiss on his shoulder. "But your dad didn't react that way?"

"He'd heard the legends, of course, not that anybody who hadn't seen a supernatural creature face to face believed in them. So he was sort of prepared when Mom revealed herself. That was after they'd been lovers for a few weeks."

"She didn't have your problem?"

"Being full-blooded, she had control. She was more worried about another part of the legend, which claims men who take kitsune lovers usually waste away from the constant sexual drain."

"That didn't happen to your father, did it?"

"No, she wouldn't risk hurting him, and she didn't have to because they fell in love. At least, that was her theory. She said it turned out real lovemaking was much more satisfying than plain sex." Another blush heated his face. "She loved him enough to give up her home, which means a lot to a kitsune. Like I mentioned earlier, she died when I was just a teenager, probably because she'd been cut off from her home ground for so long."

"Didn't your father think of taking her back to Japan?"

"By the time he realized what was wrong and made the offer, she said it was too late. Anyway, she would never have left us, and she didn't want to drag me away from my home. Being self-centered like most kids, I had no idea what she was giving up. I took her for granted like any teenager with his mother."

Tabitha smoothed Kenji's hair back from his forehead, willing his sorrow and guilt to fade. "Judging from what I've seen of mothers, she enjoyed doing what she thought was best for you."

"She lived long enough to coach me through my first change and warn me what to expect. She taught me to conjure foxfire and create a secret space like the one here in the house. She explained about the tie to my native ground. She also warned me that I'd need lots of sex. What she didn't know was that my half-blood nature meant I wouldn't have her control over the transformation. As a teenager, I had a hell of a time with the change overwhelming me whenever I felt violent emotions. Not just sex, others too, like anger. When that Shawn guy tried to attack you, I almost lost it."

"So that's what was going on." She couldn't accept that she and Kenji could never share total penetration. The need to untangle the problem overrode her self-consciousness in discussing it. "If you got regular sexual release, maybe you could develop better control."

"Yeah, if I could ever get that intimate with a woman in the first place. You saw what happened."

"Now that I know what to expect, I won't be afraid." The hope rising in him compelled her to add, "Not much, anyway. I know you won't hurt me."

Gratitude welled up from him to flow around her like a warm breeze. His head sagged onto her shoulder, though, with the momentary spark of hope dying away. "What kind of relationship could we have if we can't consummate it? I couldn't ask you to live that way."

"Maybe how I want to live should be my choice." She skimmed a fingernail down the center of his chest to emphasize the point. "Wait, if you need sex to stay healthy, how did you get along all these years if you're still a virgin?"

"Quantity makes up for quality. I take care of it myself. Almost every day. I found out if I don't want to change while I'm coming, I can get relief in the shower. The water seems to give me a little more control."

"So that's why you decided we should make love in the hot tub."

"Yeah, but I don't think that would keep me from changing if I penetrated you. It's almost too exciting just to think about it. Or would be if we hadn't run out of energy."

"Speak for yourself." She gave him a playful slap on the arm. Actually, though, she felt more weariness than arousal too. Her eyelids were beginning to droop.

"Uh, to be completely honest, I'm not exactly a virgin. I've never been with a woman, but there are lots of wild foxes around here. In the early part of the year, the vixens go into season." He lay still, his muscles rigid, his thoughts taut with apprehension.

"You mean you—" She couldn't deny her first reaction was shock. "You fathered fox cubs?"

"I hope not, and if they exist, I hope they're ordinary foxes. I'll probably never know." She felt him collecting his courage to speak on. "I won't blame you if you never want to touch me again. All I can say is that when I'm transformed, my human thoughts get submerged unless I make a special effort, like when I hunted for Chloe. I think and feel like a fox, and I can't resist the scent of another fox in heat." Though he

didn't move, she sensed that inside he squirmed with shame. "I would have gone crazy if I hadn't mated with them."

She swallowed. "I understand. I can't blame you. Even feeling your emotions, I can't fully imagine what it's like to become an animal."

He relaxed a little. "Even as a man, I have some animal traits. I see better in the dark. My hearing and sense of smell are keener. You have no idea how excited I got from your scent when you were aroused."

A hot blush suffused her. "That's what you meant when you said I smelled delicious?"

"Sure. When we met on the trail yesterday, I could tell how you reacted. That's what drove me over the edge so fast."

She hid her face against his chest. "I may never be able to look you in the eye again," she mumbled.

"Then don't look, as long as you don't stop touching. Now go to sleep." He turned on his back with one arm still wrapped around her. His contentment sheltered her in a warm nest. She laid her head on his shoulder, draped an arm over his chest and let herself drift into oblivion.

* * * * *

Sunlight sifting through the curtains woke her. Disoriented for a minute, she looked around the room, trying to figure out where she was. She lay alone in a wide bed. A door in the corner opposite the exit to the hall opened, and Kenji emerged. She realized that door connected to the hall bathroom. "Want to take a shower before we go to the hospital?" he said. "I've put your clothes in the washer-dryer already."

She sat up, shaking her head and combing her fingers through her hair to chase the cobwebs from her brain. Kenji's bare limbs and damp, tousled hair looked sleek and strokable. Had she really seen him turn into a fox and then back again? His tentative glance at her confirmed that something strange had happened, and he worried about

her morning-after reaction. But she couldn't talk about the strangeness until she finished waking up. Instead, she said, "You do laundry?"

He laughed. "I've lived alone for years. What do you think I do, replace my clothes every week?"

Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she let her gaze roam up and down his body. His penis stirred. "Sure you don't want to get back in the shower with me? You said it helps you with control. Maybe we should experiment."

His luscious brown eyes lingered on her breasts before rising to her face. "Not if you ever want to leave the house. Your folks are probably at the hospital already."

A glance at the clock spurred her to jump to her feet. Past ten! She snatched up the kimono, rushed into the bathroom and switched on the shower.

When she emerged a few minutes later, wearing only the robe, she found Kenji in the bedroom fully dressed. He'd left her dry clothes on the bed. While she scrambled into them, he poured her a cup of tea and handed it to her along with a roll wrapped in a napkin. After gulping down most of the tea, she sampled a bite of the sweet bread. "I guess we'd better go." At the thought of facing her parents, she wished she could retreat into Kenji's secret den and hide there forever.

In the car she finished the roll, though it settled into her stomach in a lump. Kenji glanced at her from the driver's seat. "I can't read emotions the way you can, but I can smell your nervousness. Don't worry, I'll stick with you."

At the hospital, he held her hand while walking across the parking lot. She braced herself as they entered the main lobby. Fortunately, the atmosphere didn't bristle with pain and fear like the emergency room. The worst she felt was low-level anxiety hovering in the air like cigarette smoke. They headed for the front desk, where she identified herself and asked for Chloe's room number. The receptionist gave her the information and directed her to the elevators around the corner.

On the way, Tabitha and Kenji passed another counter, where a stout, middle-aged man in a rumpled sport shirt barged up to the woman behind the computer and

shouted something about a bill. The flare-up of his anger buffeted Tabitha like a shock wave from a grenade. She involuntarily lifted one hand in front of her as if she could raise an invisible shield to ward off the attack. Kenji glanced at her and slid his arm around her waist. "It'll be all right," he whispered. "Don't pay any attention. Focus on me. Concentrate on what I'm feeling."

She forcibly shifted her attention from the outraged man to Kenji. Caring and affection emanated from him. She basked in it like sunlight through the leafy branches of the woods in springtime. It surrounded her like a shimmering bubble. The man's anger receded into the distance, so muted it no longer made her head pound.

She met Kenji's eyes with a delighted smile. "It works. It doesn't hurt anymore."

His lips grazed her hair. "Great. Just keep focusing on me, and you'll be fine."

They had the elevator to themselves. She leaned back against him, with his arms around her immediately below the curve of her breasts. As long as he could surround her with this snug shelter, she didn't care whether he changed into a man-eating wolf every night.

All too soon, they disembarked at Chloe's ward. Odors of disinfectant and sickness hit Tabitha when they stepped out of the elevator. She noticed Kenji grimacing and remembered what he'd said about the keenness of his nose, even in human form. She curled her arm through his and whispered, "I know it's uncomfortable for you too. We'll prop up each other." She stretched out intangible tendrils to caress his mind and smooth its ruffled surface the way she had petted his fur a few hours earlier.

"You're doing something to my head, aren't you?" he said in a low tone. "Thanks."

Turning left, they started down the corridor. In the distance, Tabitha heard her mother's voice. She redirected her attention, like tuning a radio to a new channel, to Kenji's silent comfort.

A wave of anger burst upon them from behind. She turned to face Chloe's boyfriend Shawn.

Chapter Ten

Tabitha clutched Kenji's arm for support. "What are you doing here?"

"That woman in the lobby wouldn't tell me the room number, so I hung around outside until you showed up. I watched you get into the elevator and saw what floor you stopped at. I told you I wouldn't let you keep me from seeing Chloe." The boy's frustration and anxiety made the air in the hallway feel as dense and dark as a thundercloud.

"My parents are here. You sure you want to run into them?"

"I don't care." He charged ahead of them down the hall.

Tabitha quickened her steps, still clinging to Kenji, who kept pace with her. "You'll do fine," he murmured. They reached Chloe's semiprivate room a few seconds behind Shawn. They had to wedge in next to him on the room's threshold.

Chloe reclined, propped on pillows, in the nearer bed. The one next to the window was unoccupied and made up. Between the beds stood their mother, who clutched Chloe's hand as if to stop her from leaping up and flinging herself at the boy. Their father, arms folded, stood closer to the door, as if guarding it. The two of them glared at Shawn, who glowered back.

"What do you think you're doing here?" Her dad's voice sounded like a club hitting human flesh.

Her mother interrupted him with, "Get out. She can't see you," while in the background Chloe groaned, "Mom, Dad, please!"

Tabitha felt Chloe's humiliation, overriding emotional distress and the drug-muted throb of physical pain. The anger between their father and Shawn clashed like thrown boulders colliding. Their mother's tone sliced the air like a knife. Tabitha took an

involuntary step backward. On one side she felt scorching flames, on the other an icy gale. *I can't take this.*

Kenji's hand squeezed hers. The gesture reminded her to focus on him. Again she deliberately shifted her attention like a weathervane turning in the wind. His affection enveloped her. She felt a rosy cloud cluster around her and cushion the floor under her feet. She floated on it, above the turmoil. With one hand still clasping his, she reached for her father.

"Dad, Mom, I'm glad you're here." That statement was true enough, if only from relief at transferring responsibility for her sister.

Her dad dragged his eyes away from Shawn and glanced at Kenji. "Who's that?"

Tabitha tightened her grip on Kenji's hand. "Mom, Dad, meet my neighbor, Kenji McGraw. He gave me a ride."

Her father granted Kenji a curt nod then focused on her again. His frown faded. "If you'd called us yesterday, this wouldn't have happened in the first place." But he accepted Tabitha's light kiss. His anger, now simmering instead of boiling, leaked through the insulation of Kenji's nearness.

"I hoped Chloe would do that herself. Hi, sis, how are you feeling?"

"Like you don't know." Chloe flicked a scornful glance at Tabitha then looked at Shawn. "I was going to meet you like I promised."

"Yeah, I know. Uh, I'm sorry you got hurt."

Chloe said with a small shrug, "It's cool. No big deal."

"No big deal? You broke your leg with that stupid behavior." Tabitha's mom circled around the bed and gave her a cool peck on the cheek. "And *you* let her wander around the woods at night."

Tabitha found that as long as she kept touching Kenji and focusing on him, she could maintain negative emotions at a distance like a lightning storm viewed through a

plate glass window. "I didn't let her. She made her own decision, and I couldn't keep her locked up like a prisoner."

"You're older. You're supposed to exercise better judgment."

She could almost hear the familiar nagging: *If your sister jumped off a cliff, would you jump too?* "Come on, Mom, that argument worked when we were kids climbing trees in our Sunday dresses. She's practically grown up now."

"Too bad you didn't think about that yesterday," Chloe broke in. "Shawn, when I get back home, I'll go out with you anytime."

"No, you won't," her parents chorused.

"Where do you get off—" Shawn started.

The room felt like a hedge of thorn bushes. Tabitha edged closer to the protective blanket of Kenji's presence and held up her free hand. "Hold it. Time out."

Surprise at her speaking up stunned them into silence. She used the instant of quiet to probe the tangle of emotions emanating from all four. With Kenji's caring to steady her, she explored facets she hadn't been able to perceive before. She peeled back layers of feelings like strips of bark, to expose the green core underneath. Shawn worried about Chloe's injury, felt guilty that he'd persuaded her to go out in the middle of the night and fidgeted under the looming anger of her parents. Chloe's stomach was knotted with desire to be near him and the sour awareness of her parents' disapproval, along with a veneer of defiance to hide how much their rejection hurt. Their dad feared she might leave home and not come back next time. Their mother worried about how far Chloe and her boyfriend had already gone toward intimacy. At the deepest level, both of them harbored sorrow over the rift with their daughters.

Tabitha caught that thread and clung to it, letting the others slip to the edge of her consciousness. "Mom and Dad, you're right. I should have let you know where Chloe was right away." When Chloe drew a breath to make an indignant protest, she said, "And I should have leveled with you the minute you showed up, not let you think I

might support you running away. Shawn, I know you really care about her, and the folks should cut you guys some slack.”

She felt Kenji’s approval like a sunbeam through clouds.

After a moment of silent gaping, her mom said, “It’s not your place to dictate how we raise your sister.”

“No, I’m just saying what I feel you need to do if you don’t want to drive her away.” Both parents winced at that remark. “And you know my feelings are reliable, even if the idea scares you sometimes.” Her dad stared at her as if she’d grown horns or wings. Neither of them had ever spoken about her power in such explicit terms before. “It’s not my job to be a buffer between you and Chloe, much less make her do what you want.” She glanced at her sister. “Just like it’s not my job to cover up for you. So all of you just chill out and start getting along.”

She spread her arms, with the fingers of one hand still twined in Kenji’s, and drew on the affection he spun around her like a cocoon. She gathered invisible threads of that cocoon and broadcast them around the room to create a web of calm. To her astonishment, it worked; the web coiled around all four of the combatants and made the imaginary thorn hedges dissolve into nothing. No predicting how long the effect would last, but for the moment they’d become calm enough to listen to each other.

“Way to go,” Kenji whispered.

“I know you all need to talk, so I’ll head home,” she said. “Mom, Dad, Chloe, I don’t have any close deadlines coming up. How about if I drive down to visit you guys in a week or two?”

Her mother and father nodded. Chloe just stared. After giving each of them a quick kiss, Tabitha retreated into the hall with Kenji, who cast a general “nice meeting you” over his shoulder as they left. Pulling him along, she hurried to the elevator, half afraid the spell would wear off before they got out of range.

In the elevator she let out a long breath and sagged into his arms. “Wow. I’ve never been able to do that before. Thanks.”

"For what? You did it all, not me."

"I couldn't have done it alone. Maybe I won't have to stay a hermit for the rest of my life after all."

He kissed the top of her head. "Can I hope I won't either? I want to be with you, but I admit I'm still afraid it won't work." His aura quivered with hope and apprehension.

"Why? The fox thing?" She still couldn't quite believe she'd seen what she had, but if not, their whole night together had to be a dream, and she needed it to be real. "I won't let you go because of that. If your parents could manage the situation, so can we."

The elevator slowed to a stop and the doors opened. They had to face the world long enough to reach the refuge of the car. Clasp hands, they strode through the lobby to the parking lot.

They didn't talk on the way to his house. Tabitha glowed with incredulous joy that he'd seen the negative as well as positive effects of her power and didn't shrink from her. She sensed the same stream of quiet happiness flowing through him, but disturbed by the undercurrent of fear that his animal nature would wreck their union.

At his place, she headed straight for the secret room. He'd claimed she had access to it now. Did she? With her hand on the doorknob, she held her breath, half convinced that she would find only a closet, that she had dreamed the garden chamber. If so, the fox transformation would have been a delusion too. She shut her eyes and flung the door open.

When she dared to look, globes of foxfire drifted near the ceiling, the fragrance of jasmine perfumed the air and the serenity of the garden surrounded her. "It's real," she whispered.

He embraced her from behind, his palms cupping the bottom curves of her breasts, his torso pressed against her back. "Yes, and so am I. With all the drawbacks you've already seen. Oh, God, Tabitha, I want to make love to you completely. But I'm not sure that can happen."

She rubbed her bottom against him and felt him harden. Excitement, his and hers mingled, hummed inside her skull like a hive of bees. Liquid welled between her legs. "So do I. You know that. And I won't take 'can't' for an answer. I didn't think I could face my folks, remember? But you helped me achieve that. The fifth impossible thing."

She twisted around to face him. The darkness that shadowed his eyes made her long to reassure him. With their heights so similar, she didn't have to stretch far to kiss him. With a sigh, he opened his mouth and darted his tongue between her lips. His hunger caught fire, and hers flared to meet it. His erection pressed into the V of her thighs. She shifted her legs farther apart to take full advantage of the tantalizing contact. They fitted together so well it seemed unnatural to think of parting. He licked the corner of her mouth and rasped his whiskers across her cheek. Her face heated, and the tingle spread downward, stiffening her nipples and clit.

"You make a persuasive argument," he said hoarsely.

"It's totally logical." Her breasts felt heavy, and she could almost see the blood pooling in her lower abdomen. "So quit arguing."

"I'm not. I'm ready whenever you are."

"Yeah, I noticed." She swiveled her hips to rub against the hard ridge in his pants. "I'll be right back."

He already panted as if he'd run a mile, and her breath came almost equally rapid and shallow. She struggled to fill her lungs while she ducked into the bathroom and undressed. The kimono had spontaneously hung itself back on the hook, unless a new one had appeared out of the ether. She decided not to wear it. She wanted them completely exposed to each other.

When she peeked around the screen, she saw to her relief that Kenji felt the same impulse. He stood naked in the middle of the chamber. She didn't see his clothes anywhere. Maybe he'd stripped in his bedroom and come back. A new aroma scented the air, sandalwood incense. She glanced at the lacquer table and noticed a cone of it in a dish.

In the eerie light of the foxfire, Kenji's bare limbs and torso gleamed. Passion poured off him in waves. She stepped into the fiery sphere that surrounded him. It bathed her so that she could almost see coruscations of light dancing on her skin, the same glow that radiated from the luminous globes. His arms enfolded her along with the sizzling energy. By now his cock had become fully erect. His tight embrace trapped it between their bodies and squeezed her breasts against his chest. To her heightened perception, his heart seemed to pound in time with the pulsation of his desire, and her heartbeat fell into sync with it.

"I'm so wet I can't stand it," she murmured into the hollow of his throat. Salt flavored his damp skin.

"I know," he said, his voice rough. "You smell ready."

"You can tell that way?" Her whole body flushed, heightening her sensitivity to the hairs that bristled on his legs and chest.

"Sure. I knew you were excited yesterday in the woods. Why do you think I couldn't wait to come?"

"Yes, I'm ready. I'm melting inside. And you're almost there too."

"Yeah, but not melting." He rocked his hips to emphasize the point.

She slipped her hand between them to fondle the rigid tip of his penis. "No, definitely not."

He groaned. "You smell so great I could eat you alive." Grasping her bottom in both hands, he hoisted her up.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, gasping when his cock pressed harder into the hair on her mound. "Well, do it!"

He carried her to the nearest pile of oversize pillows and lowered her onto her back. He broke out of her grip and swooped downward to plant his mouth over her clit. "Here?" he muttered.

"Yes, you know it, right there!" She couldn't help wiggling. He had to grab her hips and hold her still. He'd learned quickly from the first time. After a couple of long, slow laps that made her moan and clutch the cushion under her in both hands, he returned to her clit and flicked it rapidly back and forth, up and down, faster and faster as her hips arched to meet his tongue. The need built inside her until she saw lightning flashes behind her closed eyelids. "You too...come on."

He ignored her, though she felt his aura vibrating with hunger. Instead, he licked even faster. Her legs tightened, her nails gouged the fabric she lay on and her muscles quivered with rising tension. She blacked out, all sensation rushing to the swollen head of her clit and the well of molten liquid behind it. At last the explosion burst from her, the contractions rippling through her until she melted into complete relaxation.

When Kenji moved up to recline next to her, nuzzling her neck and fondling each breast in turn, she asked, "Why didn't you enter? You're on the brink too."

"I wanted to make sure you had satisfaction before we tried that. If I can't control the change, I don't want to leave you hanging." His eyes gleamed, and this time she knew the glow was really there.

His need made her eager to start over. "Don't think about that. Just take what you want."

"You know what I want," he growled. He crossed one leg over hers, rubbing the tops of her thighs. The bristling hairs drove her half crazy in seconds. The tickle spread to her clit, and her nipples peaked in sympathy with the swelling down below. She sensed anxiety crawling under his lust, but passion made him disregard his fears. When she spread her legs, he rolled on top. She cradled his cock at the apex of her thighs. He delayed the final joining by lapping her nipples, one after the other. She goaded him by flexing her hips up and down.

"Come on," she said. "I know you want to be inside my pussy."

With a snarl, he grasped her thighs, pulled them apart and thrust the head of his cock between the folds of her slit. The hot, slick tip made the sensitive nerves quiver in

anticipation of his thrusts. The crimson haze of his passion surrounded both of them. Again she felt the pressure in his cock, and her clit echoed it with unbearable tightness in the cluster of tiny nerves and blood vessels. "Deeper," she gasped.

His teeth clamped onto the side of her neck. He plunged in to the hilt. A shudder coursed through both of them. In the back of her mind, she once again felt the stabbing pain of penetration. Most of her awareness, though, was filled to overflowing with his urgent lust. He slid halfway out, braced on his forearms, trembling with the effort.

"More!" she cried. She felt his cock start to throb, a sensation transmitted directly to her clit and vagina. Where his body pressed on hers, it felt hot enough to brand her.

The teeth at her neck changed, became needle sharp. He raised his head, emitting a howl that resonated with the cry of despair in his mind. The hair on his chest thickened, turned white and spread over the bare flesh. Russet hair sprouted on his arms. His face lengthened and narrowed, nose morphing into a muzzle. The musky smell that had lingered faintly on his skin grew stronger.

Though dizzy with desire, Tabitha couldn't squelch a mental leap of alarm. Kenji, only half human now, lunged backward. He crouched at her feet, panting.

Chapter Eleven

Gathering her wits, she damped down the momentary impulse to flee. At this point she couldn't tell for sure how much of that was her own and how much his. She raised herself on her elbows and extended psychic tendrils toward him. They twined through his aura and muted his panic a little.

Still, he edged away from her, toward the door.

She scrambled to her knees on the cushion. "Don't you dare think about running away."

He hesitated, tongue lolling between open jaws. His fangs looked completely vulpine now.

"It's all right," she said. "I won't rush out screaming if you change the rest of the way."

His taut grip on his animal self slackened. In a rush of heat, his body folded upon itself and flowed into fox shape. When she held out both arms, he trotted to the cushion and laid his head on her lap. The need for release still simmered in both of them. While one of her hands fondled his ears, his tongue lapped the other hand. Then he licked her stomach just above the triangle of hair. A shiver convulsed her. Whining, he drew back to rest on the cushion. His tail switched from side to side. Although a cloud of shame hovered around him, his hunger hadn't died. He involuntarily thrust into the cloth under his belly.

"Turn human." She ran her palm down the bristling fur of his back.

He growled. She caressed him with hands and mind, envisioning her fingers smoothing out the tangle of his need and fear. Again the scarlet cloud enfolded him. The fur shrank and vanished, his face flattened into human features, and his limbs and

torso expanded to normal size. Under her touch, the scorching heat of his flesh faded to normal body warmth.

He hid his face on her lap, his breath hot against the hairs of her mound. Between that persistent tickle, the molten liquid inside her from his penetration and her awareness of his erection straining for relief, her head spun with the need to have him inside her. "See, the world didn't end. Take me, quick."

"I can't." His voice quavered on the verge of a sob. "I can't stand to have that happen again."

"Maybe it won't. It almost worked. We can't give up." She slithered down to lie beside him. Her fingers skimmed his firm nipples and crept down the front of his body to his cock. He groaned when she encircled his shaft. "Touch me."

He slipped his fingers between her moist folds and traced a path through her cleft up to her clit and back again, over and over in long, slow strokes. Equally slowly, her hand glided up and down his shaft, pausing to squeeze the tip at the end of each stroke. She felt the pressure building in him. "What else?" she whispered.

"Touch my balls." His guttural tone approached a growl, but his shape didn't change.

Her other hand cupped his scrotum and bounced it in her fingers. She could almost feel the semen ready to erupt from it.

"Can't wait," he gasped. "Have to come!"

"Well, come on!" Before he could resist, she rolled him onto his back and climbed astride.

Panic laced the flavor of his passion. He gripped her shoulders to hold her off.

"Listen, you! I want you this way, but if we can't, it'll be all right. If you have to change into a fox every time you climax, we'll work around it. It won't stop me loving you." The words escaping from her mouth startled her. For a second she felt about to

drop off her own cliff of panic. Digging her nails into his chest, she forged on. "But I don't believe it has to happen that way." She lowered herself onto his shaft.

It pierced her to the core. When his hips pumped wildly, she fell into the rhythm with him. She felt his animal nature surge out of the depth of his being, along with the sliding of his cock in and out of her eager pussy. Fur again sprouted on his legs and chest. With a growl, he tried to push her off. She tightened her thighs and vagina around him. "Stop!"

He froze, his muscles quivering with tension. She ran her fingers over the russet hairs on his chest until they vanished into his heated skin. She tweaked his nipples, and he closed his eyes and moaned. His claws dug into the cloth under him, but otherwise he stayed human.

Only then did she start rocking again. After a few thrusts, the beast once more heaved to the surface. Fur coursed over his body, and he bared his fangs in a ravenous growl. Again she stilled him and imprisoned his body under hers while her hands and mind caressed the fox until it yielded to the man. His cock throbbed inside her.

"I need to come," he groaned.

Her channel was pulsing too. "Now!" she gasped.

With one part of her mind, she stroked the fox spirit into submission, while the rest of her luxuriated in the need that soared to fulfillment. She rode his thrusts to the peak. When he started to spurt, her clit throbbed with every pulsation and her canal rippled around him. He threw back his head and howled. When he felt as if he might fracture and melt in her arms, she embraced him so tightly both of them could hardly breathe. Together they glided through the final ecstasy to a peaceful release.

"You did something to me," he panted. "Controlled me."

"Tamed your animal self, the way I used to tame ordinary animals. Do you mind?"

"No, it's fantastic." His voice and thoughts dissolved into a warm fog.

She lay for a long time with her eyes shut, tasting the salt on his skin where her lips nuzzled his neck, feeling the heat of his body under her gradually cooling, basking in his contentment. His hands stroked languidly up and down her spine.

Finally he said, "The sixth impossible thing."

"Controlling your change?" she murmured.

"Not just that." His chest rumbled under hers. "You said something about love." His breath ruffled her hair.

She lifted her head. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you with the L-word." She sensed, though, that his reaction held no taint of fear.

"Has your radar gone on the blink?" he said, echoing her thought. "You can tell I'm not afraid. Just having trouble believing it. I expected to live the rest of my life without the L-word." His gold-flecked eyes captured hers.

"Me too." Tears blurred her vision. "I guess I need more practice accepting the impossible."

"Let's practice together." He drew her down for a lingering kiss while sparks of foxfire danced above them.

About the Author

Marked for life by reading *Dracula* at the age of twelve, Margaret L. Carter specializes in the literature of fantasy and the supernatural, particularly vampires. She's received degrees in English from the College of William and Mary, the University of Hawaii and the University of California. She is a 2000 Eppie Award winner in horror and, with her husband, retired Navy Captain Leslie Roy Carter, she coauthored a fantasy novel.

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