

IN DARKNESS WE DWELL



BIOHAZARD

HONORIA RAVENA

BP

Biohazard

IN DARKNESS WE DWELL: BK 1

by Honoria Ravena

Breathless Press
Calgary, Alberta
www.breathlesspress.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Biohazard
Copyright© 2009 Honoria Ravena

ISBN: 978-1-926771-21-2

Cover Artist: Justyn Perry

Editor: Sandy Scoville

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Breathless Press
www.breathlesspress.com

For Lindsey. Good luck in the Navy.

CHAPTER ONE

JAYDEN

The tranquilizer dart sank into my hindquarters. I kept running. If I took the time to remove the dart, the hunters would be on top of me. Crashing through the forest, I listened to the shouts of the shapeshifters in pursuit.

I spotted a bolder and scrambled behind it. The hunters thundered past me. I sat down and twisted my head. Biting down on the fuzzy end of the tranquilizer dart, I pulled it out.

I stood and was swamped with dizziness. My vision blurred. I stumbled to the left and fell. Growling, I made no move to get up. The drug would wear off in a few minutes. My people had yet to make a drug that kept the carriers of the Wereanimal Strain sedated for long.

Now I just had to hope that the bastards hunting me didn't double back. I wanted them to leave me alone, but I knew they couldn't. Since I was carrying a disease that created their mortal enemy, they had to kill me, or bring me in for testing. Shuddering, I tried not to remember the facility I'd been brought to in the seventies.

Against my will, the image of the disposal pit I'd been tossed into flashed through my mind. Broken, bloody bodies tossed onto each other like kindling. Innocent people...

I shook my head to clear the memory.

Despite the fact that I stayed in tiger form and avoided human contact, the hunters still considered me a danger. Fortunately, two centuries of avoiding them had taught me a thing or two. And the Wereanimal Strain gave me some large advantages.

I took another steadying breath and managed to stay standing. As I stepped forward, a growl erupted to my left. Shit.

A giant gray wolf came barreling out of the forest. He tackled me, and we smacked into a tree. I took off before he could get hold of me. I wasn't ready for a fight yet. At full strength I could kill the wolf, but now? No.

He let out a baleful howl, calling his friends toward me. I forced my legs to move faster. My paws flew over the ground. I gave into the euphoria of running and the adrenaline high of being chased. The forest told me where to go - something the rest of my people had forgotten how to do over a millennia ago. I flowed through the forest like a summer breeze.

A loud snap echoed around me. Agony lit my back leg and exploded in my head, and I toppled to the ground. Little black spots danced in my vision, and I roared with the pain before I could stop myself. I ground my teeth and glanced back to see what had my foot.

Fuck. A shiny steel coil-spring foot trap had been hidden under the debris on the forest floor. There was probably a mild poison coating the teeth of the trap. Mild enough not to kill me, but strong enough to keep me from changing back into a tiger once I became human.

The four trackers emerged from the trees. I growled as loud and threatening as I could make it while flicking my tail back and forth.

One of them scratched the nape of his neck. "What are we going to do with him? We're out of tranquilizers."

The leader smiled wickedly, and tossed him the duct tape. "Well Barry, you get to be like the Crocodile Hunter. Just jump on his back and tape his mouth shut."

The one called Barry snorted and lobbed the tape back at the first man's head. "Fuck that shit, make one of them do it."

He caught the tape before it struck the side of his face. He growled at Barry, and it wasn't a human sound. "Do what I say, asshole, or you won't get your cut."

The blond hunter on the leader's right snatched the tape. "I'll do it, you whiny babies."

He peeled off a length of tape and started toward me. I hissed, but the idiot still didn't back off. As he closed the distance, I lunged and locked my jaws on his forearm.

He shrieked, dropped the tape and tried to shake me loose. He drew back a fist and slammed it into my side. I dropped his arm. Cradling his bloody arm against his chest, he backed away.

He fumbled for the knife scabbard at his waist. "I'm gonna fucking kill him."

"Boss wants him alive," replied the nonchalant leader.

"I don't care!"

I heard the distinct sound of a shotgun being pumped and turned toward the sound.

A tall, blonde woman stepped out from the cover of the trees. She leveled the shotgun at my attackers.

"I've told you hunters to stay off my property. You're going to want to leave now," she lined the barrel up with the big blonde's chest. "Unless you really want to be full of very big holes."

They exchanged glances before their leader spoke. "This isn't your concern, female. This tiger has escaped the zoo."

"Somehow I don't think you're animal control. And I think it is my business. You're trespassing and about to kill an animal on my property. I have a problem with that, and I will shoot you for it. Turn around and leave."

Luckily for her, laws against killing humans had been passed after they started out-numbering our species. Being chased through the woods by a crazed horde of medieval, religious nuts was enough to convince you that terrorizing the humans was a bad idea. Before that, they wouldn't have hesitated to kill her. Her little gun wouldn't make a difference to them. They could change and heal the damage.

The leader held his ground and raked her with a sneer. "How are you going to deal with a tiger, woman?"

Her gun never wavered. "I just plan to free him from the trap. If it comes down to it, I have tranquilizers."

The men exchanged another look before they backed off. "We'll be back. And I hope he eats you for your trouble."

Her eyes flashed in the moonlight. "You'd better not be. If I see you anywhere near my home, I won't even ask what you're doing before I shoot you."

They let her have the last word as they melted into the trees like ghosts. It was as if they'd never been there.

The female circled wide around me. I growled at her. If she would leave, I could change back into a man and get out of the trap. I'd heal my injuries and get off her property.

I hesitated at the thought of leaving her. My pursuers would assume she'd helped me and been infected. They'd return for her as much as they would for me, only she didn't know it. They would catch her off guard, and they would kill her. They'd make it look like an accident, or suicide.

Damn, I couldn't leave an innocent woman to die like that. They might rape her to death. She'd humiliated them and helped their enemy.

She sank into a crouch at my back feet. When she touched my leg, I jumped. "I've never seen a trap like this. Most of the coil-spring traps are padded now, so they don't ruin the coat."

I shoved her with the foot that wasn't caught in the trap, and she fell on her ass from her crouched position. I hissed and bared my fangs.

I wished I could give her a nip to chase her off, but if I broke the skin, she was doomed to be a weretiger. At the same time, I couldn't let her touch my blood. If she got it in a cut, her eyes, or mouth, she would suffer the same fate.

She sighed and blew her bangs out of her face. "It's not very nice of you to knock me down like that. Though, I guess I should be grateful you didn't bite me." She sucked her bottom lip. "You have to let me get you out of that trap."

I snorted and laid my head on the ground. Great, I couldn't get rid of her. She stood and stepped forward. I grumbled, but made no moves to stop her. If setting me free would get her away from me, I'd let her do it, and then I'd guard her. Maybe I could come to her as a human male and convince her to leave this place.

Yeah, that would go over well. I hadn't been in close contact with humans since North America was just the thirteen colonies. I hadn't even glimpsed a human since the seventies.

The feisty woman stood on the ends of the trap shifting it on my leg. I snapped my jaws at her.

"I'm sorry! I'm not sure how to open these. I've only heard the trappers talking about them. I've never actually seen them."

Great, a savior who didn't know what she was doing. A wave of dizzying pain washed over me when she moved the trap again. I roared.

She jumped and covered her ears.

I glared at her, but in tiger form she probably didn't get the full effect.

She tried to pry the trap apart, and her fingers slipped in the blood. The trap sprang closed. Black spots danced in my vision. Don't pass out. You'll turn human. You cannot pass out.



MAURA

I gasped and dropped the ankle I'd just freed — the now human ankle — and backed up until I hit a tree.

"Holy fucking shit."

One second I'd been helping a tiger, and the next there was a naked man lying in his place. Was he a... No he couldn't be. Werewolves did not exist. And it wasn't even near the full moon. Besides, he hadn't been a wolf. He'd been a tiger.

"Yeah, sure. Then how do you explain this, Maura?"

Great, now I was talking to myself — a sure sign of insanity. Maybe I was hallucinating. I shook my head. This sure didn't feel like a hallucination. Everything was in the hyper focus that comes with an adrenalin surge.

I should leave him here. What if he was dangerous? Helping an animal get away from what looked like poachers was one thing. That had been risky enough, but helping a weretiger? Or whatever he was.

I took a deep breath and tried to make a decision. What did I know? He was injured and in some kind of trouble. If I left him out here, his 'friends' would come back. Or another animal might get him. At the very least, he would get an infection and die.

Reaching under his armpits, I nodded. I'd made my choice. I jerked his limp body toward my house. I could take precautions, and at least now he didn't have sharp teeth.

"Holy crow, you weigh a ton. That whole 'muscle weighs more than fat' thing must be the truth." This man was unbelievably ripped.

And boy was he tall. He probably couldn't pass through my door without ducking.

If he weren't some big bad weretiger, I would have jumped him. He was so incredibly gorgeous and so out of my league. Little, pudgy girls didn't attract men like him. Not unless they had a six figure income. My first husband had shown me that fact.

CHAPTER TWO

JAYDEN

I jerked awake as a warm cloth slid across my open wounds. I snapped my teeth and snarled at the female cleaning the injury. She jumped, and her wide, frightened gaze shot to mine. I moved to shove her away, and found my hands tied to the headboard.

I pulled at my bonds, shaking the bed, and ignored the small bubble of panic that rose in my chest at the thought of being trapped. "What have you done, human?"

She stepped back from the bed and pointed a handgun at me. "It's just a little insurance. I don't know who, or what you are, and until you convince me that you won't hurt me, you're staying tied to that bed."

I sneered at her. "Your ropes can't hold me."

I tried to change, and found that I couldn't. I roared and yanked at the ropes. Dizziness swamped me, and I had to lay my head back down. Whoa.

"You have a fever."

"No shit, female." Spec-fuckin'-tacular. I couldn't change with a fever this severe. Thankfully I wasn't human. One of their kind would be dead. Eventually my body would fight off the poison, but for now I was helpless.

"Untie me."

She didn't move, just stood there with the gun in her hand. "My name is Maura."

"How is that a response to 'untie me'?"

She bit her lip. "What's your name?"

I growled. "I'm called Jayden. Now, Maura, untie me."

She shook her head, her golden curls cascading around her shoulders. She pointed the gun at the floor. "No," she said as she backed toward the door. "You haven't been very friendly. I don't trust you yet."

I took a deep breath and tried not to shout at her. "I'm not going to hurt you. Just let me go, and I'll leave your home."

"No." Her eyes locked on mine, and she hesitated a moment. "Besides, you're hurt. You should at least stay here until you heal." She turned and fled.

"Female, get back here!"

My command fell flat in the empty room. I sighed and lay back on the bed. I couldn't afford to be tied up if my 'buddies' decided to bust in and kill us.

I started working the knots. Fortunately, she wasn't good at tying them. Within seconds, the restraints fell away. Rubbing my wrists, I sat up. I'd have to take the woman by surprise, or she would shoot me. Any damage she could inflict would heal, but I really didn't want a gunshot wound. Besides, there was always a chance she would hit the head or the heart, and then I'd be worm food.

I followed her scent, and the smell of chicken soup, as I limped down the hallway. My ankle had more than likely been fractured in a few places, but it was already partially healed.

The most pleasant sound filled my sensitive ears. I peered around the corner. The female bustled around the kitchen, singing quietly to herself. She had the voice of an angel.

No, she had the voice of a goddess.

And the looks of one, too. Her body was lusciously curved. The women of my culture were all bone. There was nothing for a man's hands to grasp. No lush cushion or warmth.

I sucked in a deep breath. Lord, and she smelled incredible. Most women wore too much perfume. She wore none. Hers was the aroma of soap and her unique feminine scent.

My dick started to harden. Great, just what I needed to convince her I meant her no harm. Unfortunately, it wasn't something I could stop, and given my heightened libido because of the disease I carried, I was surprised it hadn't happened sooner.

Her taunting frame beckoned as she leaned forward and grabbed avocado, tomato, provolone cheese and lettuce out of the fridge. She slapped the cheese into a frying pan and then moved to the cutting board on the counter.

I darted into the kitchen and pushed her against the counter top. She screamed and made a wild grab for the knives in the wood block. Before she could reach a weapon, I had her by the wrists. Bringing them around behind her, I clasped them in one of my hands, then I pulled them up, forcing her upper body onto the counter.

I swept the block containing the knives onto the floor. She jumped at the sound. She struggled, grinding her ass against my groin.

I hissed and pressed my lips to her ear. "You'd better stop that. It's a huge turn on."

She froze. The acrid smell of fear emanated from her. "Are you going to rape me?"

I moved her hands to the counter top and stood her back up. "It wasn't on my list of things to do today, no."

I ran my hands as impersonally as I could over her ample chest. My erection kicked against her lower back, and she flinched.

I slid my hands future down her body. "Don't pay attention to that. It's got a mind of its own. I'm not going to hurt you. Now, don't move." I crouched, caressed her jean-clad thighs. I licked my lips. Good God, this woman's body was a work of art. She had no weapons on her. The gun must have been stashed somewhere.

Returning to my full height, I braced my arms on either side of her and nuzzled her neck. I inhaled her scent checking for any hint that she might be infected by the Wereanimal Strain.

Internally, I cursed myself. Checking her for the infection was just a good way to scent mark her. Mine! My instincts roared. This woman belonged to me. I wanted my scent all over her. I took another deep breath and swore. She was fertile. No wonder I had such a strong reaction to her.

She jerked away from me and met my gaze. She had the most startling light blue eyes.

"What are you doing?" She gasped.

"I'm carrying a very dangerous disease. I was checking to see if you'd caught it. It's transferred by blood and other bodily fluids. You've touched my wound."

When she took a step away from me, I let her out of the circle of my arms, mainly because if she struggled I might take her against the counter like my inner animal begged me to.

"I thought you had to be bitten or scratched to turn into a werewolf."

I shook my head. "A bite is a bodily fluid transfer. You can't get it from a scratch unless the wereanimal is hurt too, and it's blood gets in your cut."

She sank into one of the chairs at the little kitchen table. "So you really are a weretiger?" Her eyes grew distant. "How is that possible?" She eyed me, her attention lingering on my erection. "Will you please put clothes on?"

"I'm not a wereanimal, I'm a shapeshifter."

"Okay, but can you please put clothes on, it's a little distracting? And are you really going to argue semantics at a time like this?"

I squeezed my eyes shut and swallowed. I gripped my cock in my hand and ran it slowly from base to tip. The sexual heat in the room intensified. The scent of her arousal filled the room. Sweat broke out on my chest. I groaned and continued to caress myself.

"I'm glad you find my body distracting. I'll put on clothes when I'm sure I've convinced you not the shoot me.

I opened my eyes and looked at her. Her eyes were focused exactly where I wanted them to be. She watched me fondle myself, her lips slightly parted. God, I wanted to force my dick past those pretty lips. My erection kicked, and I almost came at the thought.

She took her eyes off my cock. "Could you stop that?"

"How about you come do it for me? Or better yet, suck me off. Or I could put it somewhere else. Some place that would make us both very happy."

Her cheeks turned a bright pink. "I don't think so."

I moaned stroked faster. "God, Maura, do me."

Shit, what was wrong with me? I shouldn't even be tempting her. She was damned if I came inside that luscious body, but I couldn't have taken my hands off my cock if I'd wanted to.

She stood up so fast her chair clattered to the floor. For a second she looked as if she wanted to drop to her knees in front of me. Then she pivoted on her heel and marched out of the kitchen.

As I watched her ass sway seductively out of the room, I imagined burying myself to the balls in her. I barked her name and the top blew off my cock. Cum coated my hands and abs.

My erection didn't deflate in the least. Fuck! I'd heard about being around females who were fertile. According to the few Carriers I'd been in contact with, it was impossible to keep your hands off them. No amount of jerking off would satisfy the desire. Any Carrier nearby would be crazed by the need to take her.

I stood and walked to the sink to wash my hands. I hoped to hell they'd been exaggerating. So far that seemed unlikely. Fuck.

CHAPTER THREE

JAYDEN

"Are you done?" Maura called from the hallway.

"Yes."

She marched back in and froze. "Are you sure you don't want more alone time."

I glanced down at my still perfectly erect penis and then back at her. "Oh, I'm sure alone time won't satisfy me in the least."

She blushed again and I groaned. "That sweet innocent blush is fucking luscious, honey. You might want to stop that."

She tossed something white and fluffy at my face. "I'll try."

I unfolded the thing and discovered it was a robe. Reluctantly, I put it on. Tying the belt so it would be very easy to untie in a hurry.

I tried to remember where our conversation had stopped. "It's not semantics." Her eyebrows came together and she frowned.

I explained. "As a shapeshifter I'm not tied to the full moon like a wereanimal. Most shapeshifters can't infect people unless they catch the full moon fever that we Carriers can give them. We also used to

have more than one animal form, but we've lost a lot of our powers because in inbreeding."

She stared at me. "Okay."

"At any rate, it's very important that you understand you're in grave danger. You made a big mistake taking me in."

"How so?"

Other than the fact that I wanted to bury my dick in her and not stop until we were both drenched in sweat and very, very satisfied? "My people kill the Carriers and anyone they come in contact with. Wereanimals are their enemy. They don't want any more of them made. I've been on the run for two hundred years. Even if I left now, they would still kill you."

She raked her hands through her hair. "This cannot be happening to me. I must be imagining this. This is some wacky dream I really need to wake up from."

I rolled my eyes. Humans. They had to make everything into a Shakespearian tragedy. Though, I had to cut her a little slack. In her world, death probably wasn't an everyday possibility.

"I might be able to take you to people who can help. The were-animal underground can probably hide you. It would mean giving up your life. I might even have to give up my life to get you in. They don't like shapeshifters."

She shook her head. "No. I'm not willing to give up my life just because you say I'm in danger. You'll leave as soon as you're healed, and I'll shoot them if they come near my house."

Baring my teeth, I stalked toward her. I glared down at her. "You don't get it, little girl. These men are superb killers. They get the job done. They can slip into your house, and you'll never know they're here until it's too late. And unless you're one hell of a good shot with those guns, you won't be able to kill them."

She locked her hostile gaze with mine and rose slowly, forcing me to straighten. "That's the point of a shotgun, baby. You don't have to be a particularly good shot to kill something with that. And if you push me too far, maybe I'll get to prove it."

She shoved me hard enough to make me take a step backward, then stepped around me and went to the stove.

I glared at her back. "I admit you'd have a better chance with the shotgun. But my people could kill you before you could get off a shot. Probably before you could even raise the gun. You don't seem to get it. We're not human. We move faster than you. We can take more abuse.

We're just plain better. I'm not bragging, it's just simple fact. We're dangerous to you."

She shrugged. "Then why haven't you taken over the planet yet, hmm?"

"Simple. Your kind out number ours."

She glanced over her shoulder at me. "You should really stay off that ankle. Do you want soup?"

I frowned at her. "Female, are you not comprehending me?"

"Maura. And I comprehend you just fine, but I'm not listening. This is my home. I'm staying here. Now, please stop looming over me and sit down."

I stalked to the kitchen table and plopped my ass down in the chair she'd been sitting in. Fine, if she wouldn't listen, I would just knock her unconscious and take her with me to the wereanimals. I wouldn't be responsible for her death.

Are you really going to take her away from her home? You would love to stop running and have a safe, warm place to lay your head at night, but you're going to take that from this woman?

I sighed. Stupid fucking conscience. If it was between her life and uprooting her, hell yes I was going to kidnap her and take her to safety.

She set a big bowl of homemade chicken soup and a quarter of a cheesecake pie down in front of me before sinking into the chair across from me.

I took a deep inhale and sighed. "Thank you. It's been a long time since I've had a real meal."

She smiled, and my heart almost stopped. It was the first time I'd gotten a real smile from her. If I'd thought she was beautiful before, she was radiant now.

"I hope you like it. I'm told I'm a fine cook."

I laughed. "Even if you're a lousy cook, anything is better than raw deer meat."

Her smile widened and she bit her bottom lip. "I'd imagine so."

I took a bite of soup and moaned. God, that was good. I was glad my female could cook. A shiver of unease went down my spine. She was not my woman. I had to get that thought out of my head.

I cleared my throat. "Why do you live out here, alone?"

She shrugged. "It's peaceful here. And I love nature. I can sit outside and watch the rock chucks, and the deer, the birds in the trees. I grew up in a big noisy city. This was my parents' summer home, and I always dreaded going back to town. So, when they died, I sold the house in New Jersey and moved here."

"Do you have a mate? Women shouldn't live alone."

Her eyes narrowed. "What century are you from, buddy."

"I'm somewhere around four hundred years old. I can't be completely sure. My kind doesn't keep track of birthdays as yours does. We don't die of natural causes. Anyway, you do the math. Will you answer my other question?"

"I'm divorced. I haven't met anyone else yet. So, no, I don't have a... mate. Why are you prying?"

I shrugged. "Just curious." I was curious because I had to make sure no one would look for her if I had to take her with me.

Yeah, you keep telling yourself that. You really want to make sure you don't steal another man's female.

She stood and took her empty bowl to the sink. I tried not to watch her backside in those skintight jeans.

I shook my head. I was not going to sleep with her. I wasn't going to touch her, or kiss her, or... I let the thought go before I lost control. Even a simple kiss might infect her with my disease.

She flounced back over to me and went to her knees in front of my chair. I had the most vivid image of her parting the robe and taking my throbbing cock into her mouth.

Her eyes met mine for a split second before she glanced away. Her face was so red, I was surprised she didn't burst into flame. I tried to school my expression into a blank mask. My lust must have been written on my face. The fact that I'd gone two hundred years without sex didn't help me resist her. It was still charming to see her blush. You'd think she wouldn't be shocked, considering I'd already jacked off in front of her.

"You are a truly exquisite woman."

Her blush deepened "I can tell you think so." She glanced pointedly at my erection.

Shaking her head as if to clear it, she reached for my injured ankle. I jerked away from her. My chair made a terrible scraping noise as it skidded across the floor.

She jumped like I'd struck her and kept her eyes on the floor. "I need to look at your ankle. You were showing signs of infection last time I checked it."

"It will heal without your interference. My body will fight off the poison eventually. It might be a few days before I can change, and I might become more ill, but I'll be fine. You shouldn't touch me. And there's more than one reason for that rule. For the most part it boils down to your safety."

"Poison?"

I cradled her jaw and tilted her chin up. "A mild one to keep me from shifting into my animal form. Leave my ankle alone. And when I lose consciousness because of the infection, don't panic. Understood?"

She licked her bottom lip, and it took all of my willpower not to lean in and capture her mouth. When she nodded, I quickly dropped my hand. It was time for me to stop touching the pretty girl.

She rose to her feet, and I stood with her. My head spun.

"Whoa." I braced myself on the table. "I think I feel that fever coming on now."

"I'll take you back to bed and bring you some water."

She ducked under my arm to support me. I almost laughed. She was tall, but her tiny frame wouldn't be able to carry me to bed if I truly couldn't make it. But I accepted her help just to steady me as we walked back to her room.

She laid me on the bed, pulled the covers over me, then sank into the wooden rocking chair next to it.

"You don't have to sit with me." I stammered, as my teeth started to chatter. "It's going to be a long night."

"I don't mind."

"You should at least be in a more comfortable chair."

"I'm fine." She turned on the little bedside lamp before rising to flip off the big light. She chose a book from her shelf and sat back down.

"Tell me more about what you are, Jayden, and about wereanimals. Why do your people hunt them? Aren't they the same?"

"My people consider the wereanimals impure. And they're all about purity of the bloodlines. They're so obsessed that it's been detrimental to the race. We are an inbred, dying people. Few children are born healthy. Hell, it's rare for children to be born at all."

I cleared my throat and sat up against the headboard. "When the barbarians came, the shapeshifters among them brought the only disease that has ever effected my people. The Visigoth shifters had been dealing with it forever and named it aptly the Moon Fever. The disease only lasts for the time of the full moon. In that time the host becomes almost rabid."

"When humans are infected, you get wereanimals. They can shift any time, but are forced to during the full moon. Shifting, and the strength that comes with it, is their only power. They have a human life span, unless they've ingested the blood of our kind, which makes

them immortal. They can't control forces of nature, nor do they have psychic abilities."

Sighing, I shook my head. "Not that our kind has those abilities anymore. We've become corrupt. Worried about purity, propriety, riches and power. We've turned our backs on our nature."

I glanced at her. She had leaned forward, elbows on her knees as she listened. "How did you become a... Carrier? That's the right word, right?"

I squeezed my eyes shut. "We were looking for a cure or an explanation. Anything to convince our people to stop killing. When I was younger, I was part of the shifter army. In that time I was forced to help slaughter countless people, and I'm not talking soldiers. Women and children. Civilians who couldn't defend themselves."

I pounded the bed with my fist and then paused and took a deep breath to steady myself. I didn't say more on the subject. I couldn't. "Me, and a group of fifty or so like-minded scientists decided to do something. We had samples of the virus in its purest form. We took extreme measures and were careless. We experimented on ourselves and even a few used humans and were animals. I always hated that."

"One day a young clumsy male tripped over his own feet and broke a tray of experimental vaccines. We thought nothing of it and cleaned up the spill. What we didn't know is that something that had been done to the samples made the virus airborne. We were all infected, but since we were just carriers for the disease, we didn't notice until we started infecting the people around us."

My eyelids felt heavy. They drifted closed and I popped them back open. "When our people realized what was happening, they had about a quarter of us killed before the rest fled. Been running ever since."

I slid back down to lay on the bed, and my eyelids fell closed without my consent. "They butchered my family, like I had so many others. Karma will always come back to bite you in the ass. But I'm not done paying. There is no payment large enough to save my soul. I don't deserve peace."

"Go to sleep, Jayden."

I forced my eyes open and met her sorrowful gaze. "Read to me, my angel."

A blush mounted her cheeks, but she didn't question me. As her soft, seductive voice flowed over me, my eyes slipped shut, and I drifted off to sleep, hoping for dreams of her.

CHAPTER FOUR

MAURA

He was right. It was a long night. I read to him long after he fell asleep. My voice seemed to soothe whatever delirious nightmares he was having. However, at three in the morning nothing seemed to help. He tossed and turned, muttering in his sleep.

I mopped the sweat off his furrowed brow and tried to keep him covered and still.

I ran my thumb over the small biohazard sign that was high on his cheekbone under his left eye. I hadn't noticed it in the darkness as I'd dragged him home. There were tiny numbers under it. 001259. The symbol and numbers were also tattooed on the underside of his muscular forearms in a larger form. What did they mean? Where had he gotten them?

He sighed and rubbed his whiskered cheek against my palm. He'd finally settled down and seemed to be sleeping in relative peace.

I sank into the rocking chair next to the bed and picked up my paranormal romance novel. Sighing, I set it back down. Like I really needed more things paranormal in my life.

Instead, I leaned back in my chair and watched the man in the bed. It really wasn't fair the he looked so yummy, even when he was sweaty and pale with fever. Even when his shoulder-length dark hair was matted so badly, I doubted the tangles would come out.

My poor Jayden. He'd lost everything. He was wrong. He deserved peace. Maybe he had done terrible things, but he'd tried to fix them, his family had been murdered, and he'd been running for centuries. Unfortunately, I couldn't just wish and make all his monsters go away.

Shaking my head, I settled in for a long night of watching the tall dark stranger in my bed.



Someone was making out passionately with my neck. I sighed and tilted my head farther. Hands eased over my ribcage and up to cup my breast. A hard male thigh rested between my own.

Hands came under my arms and lifted me. My eye popped open as my back hit the bed. Holy crap. I hadn't been dreaming.

Jayden's passion-filled amber eyes stared back at me as he lowered himself over my body. He was sweating and his breathing was labored. His skin was warm, like he was still in the grips of the fever.

His mouth crashed over mine. He tried to force his tongue into my mouth. I jumped and pushed him back. My hands met his gorgeous, muscular chest, and I almost let him go back to kissing me.

"Jayden, you're sick. Sex can wait until you're well."

He laid his full weight on me and my arms couldn't keep him away. "No, it can't."

"What's going on, Jayden? What happened to keeping your distance?"

He growled and banged his forehead against the headboard so hard that I wondered if he'd given himself a concussion. "You're fertile."

He ripped my pajama top open. Buttons flew. He sucked a nipple into his mouth and my back arched. My hands moved into his hair. I wasn't sure if I wanted to push him away or keep him where he was.

"What are you talking about, Jayden?"

"You can conceive a child right now. I can't... Oh, God." He rocked his hips, rubbing his erection against my core, making me gasp and writhe. "I have to be inside you."

Whoa. "Jayden, focus." Because someone needed to. I was seconds away from losing control.

He took a few gasping breaths. "The disease. It wants to spread. You'd be a two-for-one deal. One good screw and I create a new Carrier, and a wereanimal. I have very little control around fertile females. I thought I could resist." He nuzzled my breast, rubbing on it like a cat. "God you smell good."

He jerked away and squeezed his eyes shut. "Tell me to go Maura, before it's too late. If I kiss you fully, it might be too late. You might not be able to control yourself if the disease gets inside you."

"What about condoms?"

"Have you got condoms, because I sure as hell don't?"

"No."

He started to pull away. I tightened my grip on his hair and drew him back down to me. "Will you keep me safe from the people that hunt you? Even if we don't end up in a relationship in the long run?"

He blinked at me as if I were stupid. "Of course. I wouldn't abandon you, my Maura."

"Then just kiss me, Jayden."

"What about..."

"Don't think about it. It doesn't matter right now. All I know is that I want you."

"How can I not think about it? I'm about to damn you, and I can't even talk myself out of it."

I dragged him to my lips. After that, he took control. He cupped my face in his hands and his tongue tangled with mine, tasting vaguely of honey. A little erotic chill raced down my spine. Heat pooled in my vagina, and all doubt left my mind. I only knew need.

He broke the kiss and licked a path down to my breasts. He took one of my nipples into his mouth while he gently pinched the other.

I gasped and shuddered, wrapping my legs around his hips.

Groaning, he rubbed against me. "So responsive. God, I love your breasts. Over fill a man's hands. If I could get any harder... I'm going to fuck you all night, until we can't walk."

He shoved my thighs from around his hips, and I let them drop. As he slid down my body, he traced a warm, wet path with his mouth and teeth. He gripped my pajama bottoms and panties in his fists. He nipped my hipbone, then pulled the pants down my legs.

When he tossed them across the room, they landed on my desk, and the ugly knock-off Tiffany lamp hit the floor.

He laughed. "Well, shit."

I giggled, sat up and gripped his biceps. "Fuck it. It was an eye sore anyway." I tugged him down and put his head between my thighs.

Taking the hint, he groaned and speared his tongue into my vagina. He licked and nibbled like he was savoring an ice cream cone. His tongue stroked across my clit and my body exploded. I gasped and pressed myself against his thrusting tongue.

He didn't give me time to recover. He crawled up my body, grasped his thick cock and thrust into me. I dug my nails into his ass and met his thrusts.

That delicious pressure started to build, and I tried to quicken the pace. He laughed and held my hips steady.

"Oh, you want to play? I'll show you." I panted.

I brought my head off the pillows and licked his nipple. I bit it lightly as I raked my nails up his spine. He gasped and lost all rhythm as he pounded into me.

Blinding pleasure shot up my spine. I screamed his name, as my body shook apart. He came above me with a roar, and I felt his seed fill me. Gasping and sweaty, he collapsed next to me.

We laid there for several minutes in silence.

"I win." I laughed.

He snorted. "I don't exactly feel like I lost."

He grabbed me and tickled my ribs. "You want to go again? We'll see who wins this time."

I settled onto his chest. "Gees, give me a minute. How is that possible anyway? Men need recovery time."

"I'm not human."

I grinned up at him and wrapped my hand around his shaft. He was already hardening. I ran my hand from root to tip, and he shuddered. "Hmm... A new toy. Okay, but I'm going to suck you off this time, and I'm going to be on top when we get to the sex."

He rolled his eyes. "Pfft - yeah, like I really have a problem with those demands."

CHAPTER FIVE

MAURA

I woke up to the rich smell of coffee, and reached for Jayden before I'd even opened my eyes. There was no warm comforting presence next to me. My eyes flipped open.

"Jayden?"

No response. I frowned. Where was that man? The sun hadn't even risen yet. Sitting up, I glanced at the clock to see the time. Four twenty-eight.

The house was so silent. I froze, and let the stillness of the place wash over me. My stomach sank. Surely he hadn't left.

"Jayden? Answer please."

Nothing.

Slipping out of bed, I put on the robe he'd taken off the night before. Walking toward the kitchen, I glanced around the living room looking for signs of him. There were none.

I stepped into the kitchen, lured by the seductive scent of coffee. As I approached the counter I noticed a piece of paper was stuck half under the coffee brewer. I yanked it out and read:

*Dearest Maura,
I can't stay. The thought of having a family thrilled me
last night, but I really don't want a woman and baby clinging
to me.
Jayden*

The note blurred and it was only from sheer force of will that the tears didn't spill out. Cursing, I crumpled the note and dropped it on the floor.

I took a coffee cup out of the cupboard and filled it. I braced my hands on the counter and tried to breathe. My chest was tight. A tear splashed into the mug mingling with the coffee. I slammed my hand onto the counter top.

Stop crying, damnit. Men leave women all the time. Your husband left you, too. You had to know deep down that Jayden wasn't going to stay. It was a fucking one-night stand. Get over yourself.

How could he leave like that? Especially if what he said was true. He'd turned me into a weretiger, and I was probably pregnant with his child. How could he leave me now?

I grabbed the coffee cup, spun around and hurled it as hard as I could. It struck the doorframe and shattered, coffee coating the white paint.

The man in the doorway whistled and jumped back. "Sucks to be dumped don't it, honey? At least he made coffee before he left."

It was the leader of the group from the night before. I rushed to the knife block and pulled one free. I brandished it at him, and he laughed.

"See, that's not going to work. Even if you manage to overpower me, which is doubtful since you haven't hit your first change, and won't until the baby comes. There are two other men outside waiting for my signal."

I didn't have a chance, and I knew it. Still, I tightened my grip on the knife as he advanced. "Get out of my house."

He clucked his tongue. "Can't do that, sweetheart. You've conceived a Carrier, and you're going to be a weretiger eventually. You're needed for experimentation." He smiled and tilted his head. "Or at least killing."

He lunged for me, and I stumbled out of the way. I collapsed on all fours and crawled away from him until I hit the cupboards. I turned, preparing to stand and fight.

A loud growl came from the living room. He glanced up as an orange blur came barreling toward him. The tiger slammed him into the counter. He tumbled to the ground and slashed at the cat's face with razor sharp claws. It snarled and clamped its jaws around his throat. He screamed, and then was suddenly silent. I stared at his body as the blood leaked onto the floor. The tiger turned to me, and I tried to scramble backward. But I was as far back as I could go.

I held out my hands to fend him off. "Jayden? Are you in there somewhere?"

The great cat lay down on its belly and purred. The hairs on my arms stood at attention as his power washed over me. He began to shift back. The bones popped and reformed, and the fur seemed to be absorbed back into him. When it was done, he stood and helped me to my feet.

He ran his hands over my body. "Are you injured?"

"No."

He kept caressing me, apparently not taking my word for it. "I thought you'd left."

Frowning, he shook his head. "I knew they would come for me. I had to make you think I'd left, so they wouldn't be expecting my attack." He glanced around. "We've got to get out of here. They called for backup before I managed to tear out all their throats."

I shuddered. "Where exactly are we going?"

He tugged me out of the kitchen and down the hallway, grabbing my purse and car keys as he went. "We're going some place safe."

"I don't want to leave. This is my home, Jayden."

He grimaced, probably seeing the terror in my eyes. "I know, but I can't think of any other way you'll be safe. I can't take them all on. I'll lose, and then there will be no one to keep you safe. If we leave, I can take you to people that will protect you if I'm killed. I've heard of a vampire that runs—"

"Vampire?"

He grinned at me. "Yes, didn't I tell you? Those exist, too. This particular vampire runs a bar in Connecticut, and will take in were-animals if their situation is dire enough. I figure he'll agree that a Carrier and his pregnant mate are worthy of safety."

I raked my hand through my hair. "I don't know if I can do this." Everything I knew and loved was here. He wanted to take me off into the unknown. Into a world of vampires and wereanimals, and only God knew what else.

"I've left you no choice."

He wrapped his arms around me, and his voice softened. "You are beautiful. All soft curves, and a kind heart. You've been nothing but gentle with me, even though I'm a bitter, growling old man. I love you, Maura. I'll make you immortal, and we can be together for as long as you please. And I promise I will do everything in my power to make you and our child safe."

"I love you, too."

"Then trust me."

I took a deep breath. He wasn't asking for much. Unfortunately, trust was one of the hardest things to give. Did I trust him enough to protect me? "Yes."

A grin broke across his face, and he looked at me for the first time since we'd started this conversation. He tossed me over his shoulder and carried me to the door. "Great, no more discussion. It's time to get to a safe place so I can do very naughty things to you."

I giggled and slapped him on the ass. "Didn't you get enough last night?"

"I could never get enough of you," he said, and my heart swelled. Then he carried me into the night, and into our new life.